

Martial Unity 111

Chapter 111: Reason

Rui returned to the Academy once his bodyguard mission with Miguel ended. In the past week he had completed three missions, having earned up to a sum of ninety-six martial credits. In addition to the reward from his first mission, he had earned up to a total of one hundred and fifty-three martial credits.

Today was the dispatch and commencement of the party mission commissioned by Lowminer Industries.

Rui knew that as a service provider, clients were clients. As a Martial Artist, it wasn't particularly wise to get fixated on who the client was as long as the mission was legal.

Still, he couldn't help but feel sour. Working for the Lowminer Industry right after what his first mission was a hard pill to swallow. But it was a pill he had already committed himself to swallow, inadvertently.

At the very least, he could take solace in the fact that he wasn't doing this alone. Fae had already officially registered the five of them as a party, allowing them to take missions together. Rui found the whole concept of parties to be interesting.

For one they allowed lower grade Martial Artists to get a taste of what high-grade missions were like without bearing the full burden and risk. Even if they couldn't complete the mission by themselves, with the help of many, they were able to compensate for their personal weakness.

Fae taken it upon herself to name the party 'The Quintuple Martial Apprentices'.

Rui simply burst out laughing while Milliana stared at her with a blank expression, and Kane complained and vehemently refused to be part of a party with such an embarrassing name.

Eventually, she managed to get them to agree to the name 'Martial Quint'. Only because no one could be bothered to come up with something better.

But otherwise, the Martial Quint was a well-balanced party. Rui was an all-rounder, while Fae was an offense-oriented Martial Artist, while Kane was speed and maneuverability-oriented, Milliana was stamina-oriented and Dalen was defense-oriented.

The one Rui was least familiar with was Dalen, who was more of a mutual acquaintance of the other three. They had only sparred a few times, and had barely hung out. However, he had grown quite close to the other three, so all in all, their team dynamics were fine.

Rui found all of them waiting for him in the dispatch facility.

"You're almost late." Kane told him.

"That's a dick way of saying I'm on time." Rui retorted.

They had all worn different colour and style masks. The Martial Union provided a unique mask to every Martial Artist, allowing them to be distinguished in and even out the field while still protecting their identities. This was mainly to protect lower-Realm Martial Artists and in particular: Martial Apprentices.

Since Martial Apprentices comprised of ninety-percent of the Martial Artist population.

"Where's the commencement location?" Rui asked

"At the main branch of the Lowminer Industries." Fae replied. "Apparently the branch manager would like to meet with us once before the mission commences."

"Alright." Rui sighed.

Once they finished some paperwork and protocol, they set out immediately by foot. All of them activated a one or two maneuvering Martial Apprentice abilities.

Rui immediately noticed that Dalen and Milliana were the slowest, Rui and Fae were somewhat equal, while Kane had to actively reduce his speed drastically just to ensure he didn't leave them all behind.

This made sense, Milliana was a conservative stamina fighter, there wasn't much of an incentive for her to waste time learning more than one maneuvering-oriented Apprentice-level technique. Dalen on the other hand was a defensive-oriented Martial Artist but also a tank as far as his physique went, he had bulging muscles all over his body. Rui knew that hurting him was extremely difficult, but in turn all that muscle mass made it difficult for him to accelerate to higher speeds.

They'd reached the designated location in half an hour.

"Alright, we're here." Fae punched in the button on the record device that recorded the time at which they'd arrived at the commencement location.

Once they arrived, they walked into the huge premises that comprised Lowminer branch, making their way to the main office.

"Ah, welcome team Martial Quint. Allow me to escort you to the branch manager's office, the official client is present there and has been anticipating your arrival." A receptionist greeted them before guiding them across the gaudy building.

Rui couldn't help but feel a bit stuffy as he walked around the place. He wondered what Bella would think of him if she knew that he had inadvertently stumbled into accepting a Lowminer mission immediately following his death. Would she get angry? He didn't know.

And it didn't really matter. A remuneration of five hundred martial credits was huge, it was a whopping half of the designated amount of merits he decided he would earn before purchasing new Apprentice-level techniques and devoting himself to training.

He wanted to take another step down his Martial path, and secondarily, he wanted to grow stronger.

Compared to these two intense desires, the sentiments of the dead did not matter.

Once they reached the office, the staff member knocked on the door, walked in as it was opened by guards inside.

"Ah, you're here." A man in his late forties sat at the center of the ostentatious room. "Welcome, Martial Quint, I am the branch manager Savin Felun, the head of this branch of the Lowminer Industries. I'm grateful to you for having accepted the request filed by Lowminer Industries."

Rui took a good long deep look at the man. A salt and pepper hair and beard adorned his face, neatly groomed. He wore a perfectly fit extravagant business attire. He possessed a commanding domineering demeanor that erased all doubts about his position.

"Thank you for your hospitality." Fae responded, with her usual carefully measured tone.

"The reason I called here was to speak more deeply about the mission." The man responded. "Although I'm sure the Martial Union has done a good job."

Chapter 112: True Objective

He waved his hand and an assistant staff member in the room provided him with a map of Hajin and several surrounding towns.

"As I'm sure you're all aware of the commission objective; It's to protect our outgoing supplies dispatch batch enroute the Shadow Trails, a valley in the Basara mountains to the East of Hajin, all the way to the mission destination; the town of Gallagar." He said, pointing to a town far east of Hajin past a mountain range.

Rui nodded, familiar with the mission details. There was a small mountain range in between Hajin and Gallagar known as the Basara mountains. Their job was to protect esoteric supplies dispatch travelling from Hajin to Gallagar, through the Shadow Trails a valley in the Basara mountain range that was going to be traversed to reach their destination.

"This route has been the go-to route for shipping and transport between Hajin and Gallagar for nearly all matters, since it is the only practical means of travelling from Hajin to Gallagar without inflating the time, difficulty or cost."

Mountains were extremely uncondusive as a topography for regular and reliable means of transport and shipping due to their structure alone. Furthermore, the greater one deviated from known trails and paths in mountain ranges, the more one strayed into wild territory, which housed many best species that were part of an intricate ecosystem largely uninfluenced by humans. The risks of happening upon predators was not insignificant.

This is what made the Shadow Trails in the Basara Mountains of such vital importance. It was a lifeline for a lot of markets, industries and sectors in several towns in the geographic vicinity of the Basara Mountains. The Shadow Trails valley was what allowed for a sustainable supply and transit between all these towns.

Which is why the presence of a new bandit group that threatened safe exchanges was extremely detrimental to several economies. The new bandit had been operating for little under two months, they slaughtered their victims before extracting everything of value that could be found.

Even though this bandit group attacked occasionally, this was more than enough cause significant negative impacts. For one, the moment transport and shipping companies heard about the bandits, the prices of transport and shipping services had been increasing over time, inflating well above the norm.

This was because the risks these companies were undertaking was huge. Furthermore, a lot of employees and personnel who managed the travelling process, who were directly at risk, had either quite their jobs or demanded higher pay or a guarantee.

This was how the bandit group caused several problems beyond just the loss of life and goods.

"We have been attacked by them once before as well. This time we have decided to hire the five of you as bodyguards to protect this particular dispatch among other dispatches." Savin explained.

"Why this dispatch among others?" Dalen duly asked.

"A pertinent question, I was just about getting to that." Savin explained with a smile. "Before I answer that, allow me to talk about the objective of this particular supply dispatch that you're guarding."

Those words earned a frown from the Martial Artists. There was more to their target of protection than merely shipping esoteric supplies?

"The objective of the current dispatch is to take down the bandit group, one way or another, simply put. We have noticed that this bandit group has not been indiscriminate in their targeting. They largely aim for higher-grade esoteric material supplies from esoteric suppliers such as ourselves rather than any random travelling group." He explained. "The supply dispatch you will be bodyguarding is quite valuable, furthermore we have subtly caused a minor intel leak regarding the contents of this particular exotic supply dispatch in the right circles. This dramatically increases the probability of you being attacked. However, with your presence, we'll be able to kill all of them or at the very least highly cripple them."

This made a lot more sense. Rui finally understood why the Lowminer Industries picked five Martial Artists for a simple routine supply dispatch. It seemed far too extravagant and a highly unsustainable security measure. This could only have meant that the target of their protection was valuable and special.

"If the bandits are in the Shadow Trails, how will they have access to this intel?" Rui asked.

"Most organized bandit groups have sources of intel one way or another, usually through some elementary communication device that allows them to transmit some basic signals." Savin explained. "Furthermore, a lot of their attacks are too unlikely to be coincidences."

He paused, before continuing.

"The five of you are meant to be a guarantee for this operation to succeed. This actually a bit of a joint endeavor between several industries, who have aided us with intel spreading and some funding. Furthermore, two of our own personally employed Martial Apprentices will be aiding you in this mission."

A total of seven Martial Apprentices was an extremely solid defense team, at the Martial Apprentice Realm, at the very least.

"Are such significant measures really necessary?" Fae wondered aloud.

"For normal bandit groups, no. But this bandit group almost certainly has Martial Apprentices in it. Inspecting the scenes of massacres has allowed us to confirm this." Savin explained. "Furthermore, they implement these attacks deep in the Shadow Trails. Which makes it highly likely they base themselves in the Basara Mountains permanently. Which is extremely dangerous and cannot be done without Martial Apprentices."

This made sense. Furthermore, there was a lot at stake for the client. Valuable Martial Apprentices, high-value esoteric supplies that was going to be used to bait out the bandits and the stability that the bandits had caused to crumble.

"The reason I wished to speak to you personally was to inform you of our plan so that you would be aware and to ensure you wouldn't be caught off-guard when the attack happens." Savin explained. "If this operation is a complete success on our end, I will reward you all with a solid bonus."

Chapter 113: Priorities

The meeting did not last much longer once Savin got across the vital information he was trying to convey. Furthermore, the time for the mission commencement was due as well.

"If there is nothing else, can you lead us to the target objective?" Fae asked.

Savin nodded. "The dispatch team is actually situated at a separate facility not too far away from here, the reason I called you here was to speak to you. And also ensure you join the dispatch team carriage in a furtive manner, to ensure that there is no way that intel of your participation in this dispatch can be leaked."

This made sense. If the bandit group did have ears in Hajin and the Lowminer Industries, then walking over to that particular dispatch would be the same as announcing to the bandits that there were five Martial Apprentices protecting the supplies. It was better to pretend that the Martial Apprentices were called over for entirely unrelated matters and then sneak them into the Martial Apprentices.

"We'll have the five of you publicly leave this branch and then secretly reroute you back to the dispatch team in a pre-scheduled carriage." Savin explained.

They were being quite careful.

Fae simply nodded. "Where do we rendezvous with this carriage?"

Savin didn't say a word as his secretary took out a card with the Lowminer stamp on one side and an address specified on the other side of the card, handing it over to Fae.

Fae nodded. "We'll take our leave then."

"Yes, thank you for your services." Savin replied.

As they left, Rui grew absorbed in his thoughts. There was a lot that happened that he had to think about. For one, his impression of the Lowminers was different than what he had constructed in his mind. But he was cognizant enough to realize that his initial impression of them was, in no way, reflective of their true nature. A little bit of hospitality and respect was not indicative of a good-nature. Just a smart enough nature.

But he had also come to realize that his first mission did indeed colour his impressions of the Lowminer Industries a little too badly.

Did they do some genuinely reprehensible things? No doubt.

Were they unique in that regard compared to their peers?

Probably not.

Rui wondered about Karl Hier, Bella's father. This man singlehandedly shot to the top of the esoteric material supply industry in a decade and spent the next few decades expanding to other towns. Was that really possible without some genuinely dirty and low measures?

Probably not. Rui did not think it was possible to shoot to the top of the business game by being a kind-hearted soft angel.

Karl Hier may have been even worse than the Lowminer Industries.

Ultimately, the world was ruthless, and power and victory were everything. Only a fool would hesitate to step on other to reach the top.

This was true even in the twenty-first century of Earth, why would it not be true in a world that was much harsher and more ruthless?

Coming to terms with this washed away the final set of compunctions he had regarding this mission, though it did also make him more cynical in his worldview.

Fae broke the silence and his reverie once they had moved away from the population of the town and away from prying ears. "We'll have to stay on our toes every second of the mission, this actually a matter of life and death."

Dalen nodded curtly. "We're guaranteed to be attacked, but atleast this time we were fortunate enough to be informed well in advance. Many Martial Artist die because they're caught off-guard."

"We'll set up a shift rotation for surveillance to ensure there's someone to keep an eye out at some point or the other. We need maximum alertness on this mission." Fae instructed, earning a nod from everyone.

"Furthermore, it also helps we know that most of their attacks don't stray too far from the center of the Shadow Trails valley." Rui further added. "Meaning we know which parts of the journey have the highest likelihood of being the moment they choose to ambush us."

"That is true, that hadn't hit me yet." Kane said. "This means we can time when we're most alert as well to ensure we don't miss anything."

Fae nodded. "We also should come up with a simple set of steps to follow when the attack does occur."

"The actual commission made to the Martial Union takes priority." Rui stated. "I don't mind if their little bandit-elimination operation fails as a result. Their operation is not our mission, it's their voluntary prerogative, we just need to what we came her to do; Protect them. That is the protocol of defense-class missions."

"Agreed." Milliana spoke for the first time, as the other nodded. Rui's words made the most sense.

"Still." He continued. "It's likely they have accounted for this. That is why they sent three extra Martial Apprentices. Those three Martial Artists have likely received orders to take ambush, surround and take down as many Martial Apprentice bandits possible."

"You mean they won't be focusing on protecting the dispatch like us?" Kane frowned.

"Probably not." Rui conjectured. "That's why they hired five Martial Apprentice bodyguards. The reason they sent three extra Martial Apprentices is probably to ensure the enemy Martial Apprentices can't escape us. They'll probably try to box them, forcing them to fight all seven of us."

"Why would the bandits even try to escape immediately after ambushing us though?" Kane pressed.

"Because they wouldn't have been aware the dispatch carries eight Martial Artists, assuming these secretive measures work and they don't find out." Rui replied. "Bandits are driven by gains, attacking a travelling group protected by eight Martial Apprentices is simple not worth it. But since they aren't aware of that fact, they will attack only to be horrified they see the five of us jump out to protect the men and the goods. Unless they're unreasonable, they'll escape, it's not worth attacking us as I said."

Kane finally understood. "So the three Martial Apprentices are to ensure they won't be able to escape once we box them. And then they'll be forced to fight the eight of us on all sides."

Rui nodded. "Considering all these factors, if all goes smoothly, this operation of theirs has a decent chance of succeeding."

The carriage arranged for them was some ways away from bustling parts of the district within a warehouse.

"Welcome, Martial Artists of the Martial Union." The coachmen of their carriage greeted as he bowed to them. "We apologize for the inconvenience, but this is your designated carriage." He gestured to the carriage behind him.

The carriage was designed as a storage carriage, it had window panels that were opaque from the outside but transparent from the inside, allowing the Martial Apprentices to eye their surroundings without anybody else from the outside being able to spy or observe them. This was probably done on purpose.

They quickly boarded the carriage and it dispatched right away. Arriving at the branch that they were just at prior, entering as an inconspicuous import supply. Soon, after some detours and due procedures, it joined the dispatch team that they were hired to protect.

The mission bill already covered all the details that needed to be covered, the entire team was already aware of everything regarding their target of protection. Including all the details like number of people and carriages, and the important carriages with the esoteric matter supplies that were being coveted by the bandits.

The Martial Apprentices relaxed in the carriage, taking their masks off, as comfortable and unrestrictive as they were designed to be, it was still a pain in the ass.

"Initially, I thought five Martial Artists was overkill." Kane sighed. "But with their little operation at play, it makes sense. But as bodyguards, as long as we focus on pure defense, we're fulfilling our duties right?"

"The role of a bodyguard, atleast as defined by the Martial Union, extends beyond purely reactive protective measures." Rui stated. "Proactive measures are also a vital part of our duties, perhaps even more important. For example, if your target of protection was in the way of a canon about to fire, would you move them after the canon was fired or before?"

"You make a good point." Kane admitted. "So that means as long as enemy bandits are even near our targets, we're more or less duty-bound to eliminate the threat?"

Rui nodded. "That's probably also what that man Savin is banking on. He's planned this well, I have to say, he's minimized the risk that he's imposing on his personally employed Martial Apprentices. Since he cannot hire Martial Artists like us to proactively hunt humans, he's still managed to work away around this restriction and effectively have us fight to kill the bandits."

"This will be all of our first time fighting other hostile Martial Apprentices in a life-or-death battle."
Dalen noted

"Not all of ours." Kane corrected. "Rui got the jump on us with in that regard."

Fae turned to Rui in surprised disbelief. "No way, you're a grade three Martial Apprentice with only a single mission under your belt."

Rui sighed as the other two also turned to him in interest at those words. "The mission was under-graded in regards to difficulty. But it wasn't that big a deal, I only tussled with a Martial Apprentice for a bit before he retreated." He explained with as few words as he could.

This only caused them to get a bit more excited, pestering Rui with questions.

"Not now guys, we're in the middle of a mission remember?" Rui placated. "Don't let your guards down."

The carriage quietened down as the supply dispatch made its way. As time passed by, the tension in the air began escalating. Sooner or later, it would exit Hajin and make its way to the Shadow Trails in the Basara Mountains where they could be ambushed at any given moment.

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BEEP BEEP

A red-haired woman looked down at the communication device tucked in her belt, picking it up and reading it with a bored expression. Yet the contents of the message twitched a smile on her face.

"Boss." She turned her head to the right, facing a short grey-haired man with a demure stature. "Just got word that the Lowminer supply dispatch with the thirteen Sky Crystals was just dispatched. No unusual occurrences."

The man simply opened his eyes slowly. "Make preparations, Feilin."

She nodded in response.

"Heh!" A rough male voice far to the left grunted. "Those fools keep sending us juicy rewards. You'd think they'd have learnt their lessons by now."

"They can't help it, Vale." Feilin shrugged at the man. "They can't halt their business. That's what makes this plan the best." She grinned.

"This could be a trap you know~" A voice with a lazy drawl called out. "Do you really think the Lowminers would send not one, two or even three, but thirteen Sky Crystals?"

Feilin glanced at the man napping on a tree branch with contempt. "Hmph, I knew you weren't paying attention yesterday Han. We already covered this, our men in Gallagar have already confirmed that the supply is a legitimate supply to an order made by several clients in the crystal technology sector of Gallagar, there's no realistic way this could be a trap, not unless multiple towns are literally in active collaboration with each other against us."

Her tone made it clear she did not think this was the case

"That's not impossible Feilin." The boss interjected. His words were soft, but they commanded attention. "I wish to take some precautions before we commence the ambush."

Feilin shrugged with a resigned look. "Alright boss, as you say."

"Hmph, even if it's a trap so what?" Vale barked. "We've got five Apprentices and hundreds of men to boot. That's more than the Lowminers have in their entirety as far as Apprentices go. We can just

straight up run into their trap, crush it along with them and steal the Sky Crystals they're kind enough to donate to us and get outta here!"

"Enough." The boss glanced at Vale with just the slightest hint of irritation. "Are you questioning my orders, Vale?"

"...Tsk okay okay!" He retracted immediately. Vale was an imposing man with a powerful physique, and an aggressive temperament.

Yet there was a reason the boss was the boss.

"We'll proceed carefully." He reiterated himself with a measured tone. "I want this to be clean."

Chapter 115: Ominous

The supply dispatch had exited borders of the town of Hajin just under two hours. The Apprentices in the carriage had already perked up, growing more and more alert. They had decided that at the very least a minimum of three of them ought to keep a lookout at any given point in time.

Although the dispatch naturally had guards on horses forming something of a perimeter around the dispatch team, surveilling their surroundings, Martial Apprentices were still better. The Foundational Stage of the Academy carefully trained sensory awareness as well as their kinetic vision well beyond the norm. And the discovery of the Martial Path further raised those attributes and parameters above the conventional limit.

Three Martial Apprentices keeping an eye from within a carriage were better sources of surveillance than all the guards on horses outside.

Rui was currently off-surveillance duty along with Dalen. He used this time to gather his thoughts.

('According to the intel provided by the Martial Union, the bandits likely operate by incapacitating the dispatch convoy by crippling their means of transport.') Rui mused. ('In most cases that involves damaging the carriages sufficiently enough and slaughtering the horses.')

The reason the bandits did this was because the chances of survival of any travelling convoy was minimal if they could not maintain a high mode of transport.

Thus, even in the unlikely situation that a travelling transport or supplies dispatch convoy had the means to counter them, they would not be able to escape their predicament easily at all. The bandits could simply retreat and wait until for the right moment to launch an ambush.

Of course, thus far not a single travelling convoy had been able to successfully resist the bandit ambushes.

('Yet despite this, they continue with the norms of crippling the means of transportation in their initial strike.') Rui thought. ('That sounds uncharacteristically careful for bandits.')

Bandits were usually chaotic unorganized groups of low lives who banded together to rob travellers. They were not careful and methodic like an organized strike force. Yet all the data that Rui had gone through indicated that this bandit group was more akin to the latter than the former.

('That makes them more dangerous.') Rui did not want to fight with a disciplined group of criminals, that was much scarier than messing with a random group of thugs who simply used a braindead numbers advantage to edge out a victory.

('I find it highly unlikely that this bandit group was formed in a normal way.')

Rui felt like the probability of the bandit group being involved with some entity in the black market was much more likely, this would explain the sense of order that Rui got from them. Perhaps they were formed by some behemoth in the black market, or something to that effect?

Rui shook his head. It wasn't relevant. The point was that if they were targeting means of transport then the group would have a hard time.

Unfortunately for Rui and the others, knowing about their modus operandi did not mean they would be able to counter it. In their current circumstances, knowing this did not particularly allow them to improve their counters.

The best thing they could do at the end of the day was to defend, protect and eliminate threats. That did not change regardless of what intel they possessed. At most they could finetune their measures to be suited to handling their necessities.

For example, Rui had already concluded it would be extremely difficult to entirely and completely prevent them from damaging their means of transport at all. Largely because of the nature of an ambush. The element of surprise in the hands of the enemy Martial Apprentices could not be mitigated easily, and some loss of life as well as material loss was inevitable.

The question was what were the measure they could take to mitigate the damage inflicted, thankfully. They had already known the answer.

The answer was to abandon the outer ring of the convoy and focus on the most important and vital parts of the dispatch, as specified by the client.

The outer layers of the convoy were mostly there to act as a shield for the inner portion of the convoy, where the valuable high-grade esoteric supplies were stored.

Once the ambush commenced, Rui and the others of the Martial Quint would immediately focus on ensuring the inner circles endured as little harm as possible. The outer circles were pretty much intended to be doomed as a sacrifice.

An hour passed as they distanced themselves from the town of Hajin, and the mountains that were on the horizon at the distance had grown larger in their field of view.

"We've reached the base, it seems." Dalen noted. "The Shadow Trails is only half an hour away from here I believe."

"It's been a long time since I came here." Fae chirped.

"You've come here before?" Rui turned in surprise.

"Hasn't everyone?" Kane asked.

"Yeah, it's a mountain range. The outskirts are pretty safe, and it's a tourist attraction." Fae agreed.

Rui did a double-take, remembering that his companions were a bunch of rich kids with a Martial pedigree.

Forget touring the mountains, this was the first time that Rui had actually left the town of Hajin. Although the Quarrier Orphanage was technically outside the town of Hajin. That wouldn't count, would it?

('Wait, focus! This is important and dangerous.')

He shook his head, trying to shake away the silly thoughts.

Were it any other occasion, Rui would have definitely leisurely enjoyed the sights and taken in the new topography and environment in. It had been a long time since he'd even seen mountains.

But in this mission, with the information he was aware of, the Basara Mountains had an ominous impression to them. Like the harbinger of danger and risk. Crossing these mountains was estimated to take twelve hours.

Rui prepared himself mentally. For within the next twelve hours, he would probably be in the most danger he had ever been.

Chapter 116: Something Is Wrong

The Shadow Trails valley was wider than Rui expected, and also not as dark as the name suggested. It had been several hours since they entered the valley. For some reason Rui pictured a super narrow path perpetually bathed in darkness when he heard the name 'Shadow Trails'.

However, this was not a good thing, ultimately. The valley being very wide allowed for a much larger area over which the bandits could base and hide in. Especially since the valley was covered in a dense forest, yet there was enough space for bandits to maneuver comfortably. Furthermore, the ground

inclined upwards up both sides of the travelling convoy, giving the bandits huge stealth and surveillance advantage.

This was bad news, because ambushers already had the advantage of the element of surprise, even if the Martial Apprentices knew the attack was coming, not knowing when was a significant handicap. Because they were expending a lot of mental energy with their tense alertness over the span of half of a day.

Thankfully they had rejuvenation potions. Otherwise, they would be exhausted by the time the ambush actually commenced, fighting against fully prepared Martial Apprentices.

The only advantage their convoy had was the fact that they had eight Martial Apprentices.

('Well, whether that remains to be an advantage or not remains to be seen.') Rui thought to himself. It entirely depended on how many martial Apprentices the bandits had.

The best-case scenario was one Martial Apprentice, in which case Rui was absolutely relatively certain they would be able to annihilate all the bandits.

As the numbers grew, the harder it was evaluate as a greater number of variable and parameters all influencing the outcome of the conflict arose.

For example, the grade of the bandit Martial Apprentices, their Martial Art, the synergy between them and their opponents and the quality of teamwork on both sides.

As Rui grew absorbed into his analysis, his reverie was abruptly broken by Milliana.

"They're here." She whispered.

Rui's eyebrows knitted in confusion.

"Already?" He grew more tense and alert as he glanced through the unidirectional window. In the distance, he was able to detect many dozens of humans swarming from the forest onto the path ahead of them from a distance, triggering panic in the guard team of the convoy.

What shocked him was the fact that they weren't making much of an effort to act stealthily. They weren't even attacking under the cover of the forest, they were straightforwardly charging against the convoy from the opposite direction of their travel, out in the open.

He grew even more shocked as the leader of the charging bandits made a war cry.

"CHARGE! DON'T GIVE THEM TIME TO PREPARE!"

('Then why announce your presence to us from that far away?')

"They're here." Dalen got up with a fierce expression. "Let us complete our mission."

"Wait." Rui raised his hand, causing the others to frown. Protecting the carriage from bandits was literally their job, why was Rui holding them back.

This did not match the data he had been given.

The bandits were typically exploited the element of surprise to cleanly launch a full-on ambush on their hapless and very off-guard victims, using a numeric advantage as well as a Martial Apprentice advantage to crush their opponents swiftly.

Then why were these bandits doing exactly the opposite thing?

Rui couldn't detect the presence of any Martial Apprentice either.

"Something is... wrong." He said to the others, as he analyzed their current situation with the eyes of a hawk.

"Dude, we need to fight." Kane insisted. "This is what we're hired for, remember?"

"The mission bill specified that the actual target of protection were primarily the goods." Rui stated.
"We're not obligated to protect the security team."

The others frowned at Rui's logic. They couldn't argue against it, but that didn't mean they liked it either.

"If they manage to break through, then Kane, you can go defend the carriage containing the goods." Rui said.

He sighed, shrugging. "Alright, if you insist, but you better explain why."

"Something is wrong."

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"Oho, they're going at it alright." Feilin chuckled as she watched the skirmish from afar.

"Hmph, this is pointless." Vale grunted, leaning against a tree some distance away. "What's the point of sending only a half our raid force from afar? That too without us?"

"Well." Han said, sitting atop a tree. "The boss came up with this." He said before glancing at the golden-haired man, who stood at the forefront of a cliff, eyeing the battle. "There must be something to it."

"Boss?" Feilin sighed. "You wanna explain why you sent half our raid-force in without the other half, and without us? Furthermore, what's the point of having them charge from the front?"

"Something..." He softly murmured.

"Hm?" Feilin tilted her head in confusion.

"...Something is wrong." His golden eyes sharpened as he scanned the battlefield.

"I dunno boss." Feilin glanced at the battlefield away at a distance. "It seems like a normal battle to me."

"That's because you're not looking close enough. Look closer at the security team, what do you see?"

"Uh, they're... doing exactly what they're supposed to do? Defending the inner section of the convoy from our men?" Feilin replied with an exasperated expression.

"Yes." He said. "Do you think they're doing a good job?"

She glanced back with knitted eyebrows. "Well, much better than security teams of the Lowminers normally do. Not a single one has abandoned the battle yet despite their numerical disadvantage." She said as she observed how all of them had a rock-solid confidence and composure. They were calm and composed, fought steadily and did not panic, they even dragged the battle on, fighting a little passively.

This was not the norm. When faced with significant disadvantages, morale and performance both usually plummeted unless the guards were veterans. At least a quarter of the security team retreating against orders and protocols was not unusual either, these personnel were not battle-hardened veterans, they were barely more qualified than unskilled labour. Feilin became more cognizant of this odd behaviour the more she observed.

"I guess the Lowminers have been training their security personnel better? They're doing a good job I'll give them that. It's almost like these men are fighting like they don't think they can lose."

At those words, the golden-haired man stirred. "Yes... Exactly. The question is; Why is that?"

Feilin shrugged, unsure of where he was going with this random tangent.

"Either they're brilliant veterans, all of them, or..." He continued. "They have strong reason to believe that they won't lose...." He paused, before continuing. "...Reasons like the presence of Martial Apprentices."

Feilin, Vale and Han's eyes shot wide open, as understanding dawned upon them. Now all of their boss' antics were starting come full circle.

"That's why you sent an ambush-force that was just twenty-percent larger than their security team." Feiling realized. "You wanted to gauge and test the convoy's general reaction to numerically disadvantaged ambushes."

He didn't respond, completely absorbed in the battle.

"But why not just ambush them instead of openly charging them, then?" Feilin asked with a hint of confusion. "Wouldn't it make more sense to push them further?"

"...An ambush triggers subconscious reflexive and primal fear and panic natural to all humans." He replied softly, never taking his eyes off the battle. "I wanted to test their conscious response after giving them time to evaluate their enemies, that is much more reflective of their sense of security."

Feilin finally understood the simplicity yet the brilliance of the boss' plan. If all the personnel of the convoy acted exactly how they expected them to, then there was little to be suspicious about. Then they themselves could just join with the remaining men of their bandit group and finish the job quickly.

But if there was something strange, they would be able to detect it beforehand.

It was a simple plan that cleanly allowed them to evaluate risk with very little cost.

She sighed inwardly, remembering why the four Martial Apprentices of their group had willingly bowed their head to him. His position was not unearned.

He ignored her, growing more and more engrossed in the battle.

"Something is wrong."

Chapter 117: Pawns

The security team of the Lowminer convoy defended well against the incoming flux of bandits. Although they were outnumbered, they fought smartly, with remarkable calm and composure.

Rui, on the other hand, was not quite as calm.

('Think.') Rui urged. ('Why would they discard the element of surprise, attack us head on and that too without the Martial Apprentices?')

Rui had thoroughly memorized the intel provided by the Martial Union in the mission bill, the presence of Martial Apprentices as well as their well-executed ambushes that exploited the element of surprise had been the two major reasons they cleanly succeeded in their strikes.

What was to be inferred from their intentions if they did not use either of these two main elements that was responsible for their victories?

('It means they have no intention of winning through this particular battle. But then why even send them at all then?') Rui wondered.

All decisions were driven by incentives and disincentives, gains and loss, reward and risk. By simply applying this principle, one could gain insights into the minds of others. As far as Rui could see, there was either something to be gained through this battle, or something they could avoid losing.

('Intel.') Rui quickly realized. ('They're trying to learn more about the risk associated with attacking us.')

This was not only plausible, it was the only realistic possibility. Rui knew that the convoy was aware of the hidden operation of the Lowminer Industries as well as their presence, although they had not conveyed this to anyone, this knowledge would be reflected in their demeanor, as well as their responses in times of crises.

('They're not acting like they would if we weren't there.')

Rui's shot wide open at this. If this was truly the goal of the bandits, to evaluate the risk of attacking the convoy by gauging their response and sense of security. Even if their initial goal to draw out all the security measures set up by the Lowminers, they still gained valuable information about the convoy even if Rui and his friends stayed in their carriage.

('This is bad.') Rui grimaced.

The bandits were much smarter and sharper than he'd expected. These guys were definitely not ordinary grunts!

('More specifically, they must have an incredibly intelligent leader.') Rui mused. ('Now then, what to do?')

* * * * *

"There's one thing I don't understand boss." Feilin said.

The blonde-haired man continued gazing at the battle.

"Why aren't the Martial Apprentices acting, if they're even there in the first place?" She asked with a dubious expression.

"What do you think they normally would do if they were present in the convoy?" He asked.

"Commissioned for a regular bodyguard mission, let's say."

"Well, they would have joined the battle and defended the convoy from our men, right?" She replied with a confused expression.

"And if they were there, the fact that they didn't do this tells us what?"

"..."

"...It tells us that this isn't a regular bodyguard commission, otherwise they would have done exactly what you said earlier." He told her. "But why would it not be a regular commission?"

"..."

"Commissions made to the Martial Union are aimed at fulfilling an objective that can be fulfilled via Martial force. Different commissions fulfill different objectives." He briefly explained. "Thus, from this premise it can be inferred that if their commission is different from the norm... Then their objective is also different from the norm."

Feilin grew more confused. "A different objective?"

"An additional objective, to be more precise." He said. "Normally the objective would be to simply protect the convoy, or the important goods, atleast. What additional objective do you think there could be?"

"..."

He sighed. "An objective that the Lowminers would logically want. An objective that involves Martial force and conflict. An objective that requires Martial Apprentices. An objective that is to be fulfilled in the Shadow Trails."

He glanced at her, meeting her eyes. "What objective fulfills all those conditions?"

Realization dawned upon Feilin. "The objective of dealing with us, once and for all."

"Something to that effect." He turned back to the battlefield. "From the response of the convoy, the probability of Martial Apprentices somewhere within the convoy, or at a distance is not low. It could also be that they have certain powerful esoteric technological solutions at hand as well, though this is unlikely, because the logistical measures needed to for such solutions would be too noticeable."

He paused before continuing. "Martial Apprentices are equally powerful, but with zero logistical and inventory constraints."

"So what do we do?" She asked.

"We wait." He replied. "If they are there, they'll act sooner or later. One is at their most vulnerable at the moment of victory."

Down at the battlefield, the bandit force had just shown signs of managing to break through the perimeter and headed straight for the storage carriages.

"It's time." Rui stated. "Dalen, Kane and Fae. I suggest the three of you go." Rui instructed. "Milliana and I should stay."

"You're just trying to dodge some work, aren't you? You Martial Shirker." He grumbled, even as he followed Rui's words

His instructions didn't receive much resistance from the remaining Martial Artists either. Rui could be scarily sharp, everybody knew this. His absurd performance on the mental attributes of the evaluation exam a year ago had not been forgotten.

"Why did you make only the two of us stay?" Milliana asked out of curiosity, once the three of their teammates had left and had begun reinforcing the perimeter.

"They're a balanced team." He stated. "Defense, offense and maneuvering. They give the impression that they're a single team all by themselves."

"...So what does that have to do with us staying back."

"I want the hidden bandits to believe that those three are the only Martial Apprentices hired by the Lowminers."

"Hidden bandits?" Milliana tilted her head in confusion.

('Ah I forgot she's an airhead.')

"This mission wouldn't be graded six if the bandit group was that small and weak. These are merely pawns." He explained. "In Chess, the pawns are the weakest."

"Chess?"

"Er, never mind."

Chapter 118: Not unsurprised.

Fae, Kane and Dalen made a huge impact on the battlefield.

Fae went berserk, sending bandits flying with every strike, sprinting around the battlefield, infiltrating the ranks of the bandits, and causing general mayhem as she chopped down their numbers. She instantly tripled the rate at which the bandits were falling.

Dalen and Kane stayed closer to the inner sections of the convoy. Preventing any of the bandits from being able to cripple the means of transport.

Dalen's Martial Art defensive in nature, allowing him to ensure not a single bandit could pass through him. His imposing developed physique easily withstood anything the bandits mustered up with ease, he was like an invulnerable tank.

Kane on the other hand, zipped around the inner sections of the convoy, taking out the bandits who circled around Dalen and tried avoid him entirely. He bolted faster than most of them could react, cleanly dismantling their attacks and knocking them out.

The three of them flipped the flow of the battle a perfect one-eighty degrees almost instantly.

"Oho, look what the cat dragged out." Feilin chuckled as she watched the trio of Fae, Kane and Dalen clean up the battlefield. "Good call boss. If we simply ambushed them like we normally do, we might have been the one to get ambushed instead!"

"Hm..." The golden-haired man frowned, as his golden eyes sharpened.

"Hmph!" Vale snorted. "They're just three brats! We should just jump in and annihilate them."

"They're decent." Han yawned. "But we have a numeric advantage."

"What's wrong boss?" Feilin asked. "They have three Martial Artists, isn't that the end of the problem?"

"Just a thought..." He murmured.

"Thought?"

"If you were the Lowminers transporting thirteen Sky Crystals through a dangerous valley with a known bandit group that has a record of targeting Sky Crystals, with a minimum of one Martial Apprentice, possibly more." He paused glancing at Feilin before continuing. "Would you hire only three Martial Apprentices?"

"The Lowminers are careful and cautious but decisive when they have the means to obtain their objectives. So why hire only three Martial Apprentice bodyguards?" He squinted his eyes in suspicion.

"You're overthinking this, boss." She sighed with exasperation.

"...Possible." He admitted. "It just occurred to me that if this was indeed the case... Then Lowminers have hired someone with great intelligence and insight."

"Regardless, we'll proceed through immediately." He said. "We have gathered enough information on them. Vale, Feilin and Han, you guys jump in. I'll lay in wait and ambush one of them while they're fighting you, then we crush them four-on-two."

"Four-on-two. Where's 'he' anyway?" Feilin asked.

"...Late." The man sighed. "Now go."

The three of them nodded, before leaping off the cliff and sprinting down.

For a moment, the golden-haired man was alone, before calling out.

"How long do you plan to hide?" He said, to seemingly no one.

"How rude." A voice from the shadows replied, before walking out. "I was busy, you know."

"What are you here for?" The golden-haired man asked.

"Our patron expects you to succeed. The thirteen Sky Crystals must be procured at all costs."

He glanced at the masked figure with his sharp golden eyes. "You're supposed to be of help to this operation and to me. Instead, you're running around prancing accomplishing nothing."

The masked figure chuckled. "Doesn't look like you need much help." He replied, gesturing at the three Martial Apprentices from the Martial Union.

"Don't worry, I'll save you if things go sideways... Prince Rajak Di Kandria." The masked man whispered, before melting into the shadows once more.

Rajak snorted lightly, before turning to the battle.

"One small step at a time... and eventually this country will be mine." He whispered, with a flash of determination across his face.

* * * * *

Rui watched as his friends cleaned up the battlefield, admiring their prowess. All three of them had gotten stronger.

('Good.')

Rui nodded. ('With this, level of power, we should be fin-')

Suddenly his senses caught onto something.

A figure jumped out of the woods slamming into Dalen at incredibly high speeds.

BOOM

"Dalen!" Rui and Milliana immediately head out, but in that exact moment, two more figure flew out of the forest, attacking Kane and Fae.

In just a moment, three Martial Artists had attacked his friends!

Thankfully, the ambush hadn't resulted in any casualties. Dalen was tough enough to withstand the ambush, Kane narrowly managed to avoid the attack entirely while Fae simply countered with a palm attack.

"Awww, the ambush failed!" Feilin groaned exaggeratedly, smiling savagely, as she leapt back from Fae. "Guess we'll have to do this the hard way!"

Suddenly she sensed something at her back.

A fourth Martial Artist had appeared out of the blue!

Rui had charged up at top speed with Flowing Canon, launching his most powerful strike. He had timed the attack perfectly, getting her just as she disengaged from Fae, completely focused on the latter.

WHOOSH

Rui executed the technique perfectly, but where there was supposed to be his target, now was empty air.

She had disappeared, in a moment.

"You're careless Feilin." Rajak said to her as he put her on the ground. "We need to retreat, for now."

Rui's eyes shot wide open as a random golden-haired and golden-eyed man appeared out of nowhere, extricating his target to safety.

('He's fast! Only Kane could pull something like that.')

Just as Rajak, Vale, Han and Feilin began distancing themselves from their targets.

BOOM

They narrowly avoided being stomped as their escape route was cut-off by three huge impacts.

Feilin, Vale and Han stared on in shock as three more masked Martial Artists almost crushed them to the ground, cutting off their escape routes, even Rajak couldn't help but feel shocked.

Rui, Kane, Fae, Dalen and Milliana quickly took their spots around the important carriages of the convoy, forming a wide perimeter protective arc between the inner convoy and the four bandit Martial Artists.

The three Lowminer bodyguards were on the opposite end, boxing them in.

And in the center were the four bandit Martial Apprentices.

In the span of little over ten seconds, the number of Martial Apprentices on the field had risen from three to eleven!

Not a single one among them was unsurprised.

Chapter 119: Final Chance

There was a moment of silence on the battlefield. All Martial Apprentices focused full on their opponents, sizing them up, evaluating the situation and what course of action to take.

That moment ended quickly.

And all hell broke loose.

FOOM

The three Martial Apprentices of the Lowminer Industries shot towards the bandits. They fired a storm of attacks forcing the bandits to diver their attention towards them.

That's when Fae, Kane and Rui jumped in. The three of them sandwiched the bandits against the Martial Apprentices, punishing them through sheer numbers.

Dalen and Milliana circled a little further back, attacking and pushing them back any time one of them tried to squiggle their way through. Their Martial Art were not suited to belligerent attacks like the ones their peers were conducting.

Furthermore, trying to prevent someone from escaping was much harder than trying to not get beaten, which is why the bandits were proving to be a handful.

Yet, despite six-to-four disadvantage, they somehow were just barely managing to not get instantly overwhelmed.

('This blonde is strong.') Rui had recognized that long ago.

He was able to fight Rui and Kane at the same time, something Rui didn't think was possible within the Martial Apprentice Realm, but evidently, he was wrong.

The man had distractingly golden hair and eyes, almost as if they were emitting light rather than reflecting it. Yet his hair and eyes were only the second most attention drawing trait about him.

His Martial Art was remarkable, he had a wide wealth of Apprentice-level techniques, even more so than Rui and Kane combined.

What Rui found interesting was that he was an all-rounder. He had no distinct shortcoming and he was truly strong in all categories.

WHOOSH

He avoided a kick from Rui while blocking an attack from Kane. Rui shifted as he threw a barrage of a Vital Pressure strikes, which the man calmly proceeded to parry with a single arm, swinging his other arm with remarkable speed and power towards Rui.

WHOOSH

Rui bent backwards narrowly avoiding the strike, however that left him wide open for a follow up, which the man promptly launched.

BAM

Kane managed to throw him off by blasting him with swift kicks, forcing him to divert his attention. What shocked Rui was that he wasn't much slower than Kane, despite having a well-built frame. He used a variety of Apprentice-level maneuvering and speed techniques allowing him to keep up with Kane despite that.

Rui came to have more and more admiration for the man. An Apprentice-level technique for everything, a solution for everything.

This is what Rui strived to obtain. This is what Rui strived to become!

Why had he gone through the pain of putting himself in such dangerous missions? So that he could obtain techniques of higher grades to develop and expand his Martial Art!

He grew more and more driven as the fight proceeded, fighting with greater vigour than before.

BOOM

Dalen pushed him back as he tried evacuating.

"Tsk." He tutted before dodging a kick from Rui and blocking jabs from Kane.

BAM

He slammed Rui away with a powerful spinning kick technique, Rui felt a huge impact despite having used both Elastic Shift and Acute Edge.

('This battle would have been over long ago if it was just me.') Rui recognized that. He had been saved by Kane multiple times, and he had bailed Kane out multiple times. They both did their best to prevent him from focusing too much on one of them.

They both knew that if he did manage to focus on them for long enough, they were dead.

Speed just a level below Kane.

Striking power just a level below Fae.

Defense just a level below Dalen.

They both felt insignificant. The pressure he emitted as a result of his power was greater than any Apprentice Rui had ever seen, including the Apprentice instructors at the Academy.

What made Rui feel worse was that all-rounders were the worst type of style for the VOID algorithm. Because they had no straightforward shortcomings that could be exploited. The VOID algorithm loved shortcomings; it loved gobbling these weaknesses.

Strikers generally had a wrestling shortcoming.

Wrestlers generally had a striking shortcoming.

Speedsters generally had a power shortcoming.

Tankers generally had a mobility shortcoming.

But all-rounders had no such thing. Meaning the VOID algorithm had to go through greater pains to develop a counter-style. Furthermore, Rui hadn't fully adapted the more advanced version of the VOID algorithm to suit the Martial Art of Gaea.

These were the impediments that stood in Rui's way this time.

BAM

The man managed to knock Kane down, and was about to pummel on him when Rui just barely managed to draw his attention with Flowing Canon.

WHOOSH

He spun out of the way of the strike, generating enough torque for a powerful strike.

BOOM

Rui just barely managed to block, reeling from the impact.

For a moment there, the man was free of both the pests holding him back. Yet just as he dashed away for an escape.

BLAM

Dalen charged into him, pushing him back into the fray where Kane showered him with a flurry of swift strikes.

And back to step one again he was. His frustration was growing more and more palpable the longer this dragged on.

He had long given up on the Sky Crystals, they hadn't even crossed his mind ever since the three Martial Apprentices of the Lowminer Industries popped out.

He had one, and only one, objective.

Survive!

The Sky Crystals, his patron, his subordinates.

None of those mattered to him at this very moment. He would gladly sacrifice all of them on a silver platter if that meant he would be able to escape this predicament.

('I will not die a dog's death on this battlefield.') He swore in his heart. ('I am destined for much greater things.')

His demeanor became more and more desperate as he began fighting far more ferociously. The longer the battle went, the lower his chances of escaping and surviving.

This was his final chance.

Chapter 120: Three-on-one

The battlefield had escalated in violence astronomically. Martial Apprentices were those who were able to exceed the limits of their physicality via their Martial Art and their Martial Path. This meant that the scales of power in a fight with eleven Martial Apprentices would far surpass what ordinary humans could do.

If someone from Earth heard the battle from afar, they would no doubt assume they were near a live warzone and immediately flee. If they were to see the battleground of the Martial Apprentices, they would assume a rogue demolition vehicle had gone nuts in the area.

Broken trees, cracked rocks, cratered land, broken carriages, mangled bodies.

It was not conceivable that mere humans were responsible for such devastation.

The outer section of the convoy was damn near entirely destroyed and scattered, the men from the security team had huddled at the center of the behind the Martial Apprentices of the Martial Union. Ordinarily they would have long escaped while the bandit Martial Artists were held back, but they were to remain in the battlefield so that the Martial Artists of the Martial Union would be able to remain there to fight the bandit Martial Artists along with their own Martial Artists.

The remaining security and other non-combat personnel quickly huddled in the carriages and prayed for the best.

BOOM

Fae slammed Vale with a flurry of palm attacks, peppering with powerful blows as he guarded against them with furious tenacity.

The man's physicality was greater than even that of Dalen, so Fae had adjusted her fighting style just a little. Reducing the number of blows she fired in her barrage in exchange for increasing the power of each blow. This was because, a large number of weaker blows would not do as much damage as lower number of stronger blows.

Damage did not work like that; it wasn't linear and additive in nature in that way.

"RAAAGH." He swung at her with great power.

FWHAP

Fae deflected the attack to the side with a powerful palm attack. This was one of the latest techniques she had mastered; Spiral Palm; By twisting her core to generate torque, she could use her palm attacks not just in a linear fashion to attack, but also to deflect all incoming linear blows. It had high efficiency, although its flexibility was a little low.

The reason for that was because it really only worked on linearly incoming attacks, and not strikes with a non-linear trajectory.

BOOM

She managed to land another strike clean on his abdomen through his guard by altering her trajectory mid-strike with the help of yet another Apprentice-level technique; Curling Convergence. Since her fight Kane, she had done her best to increase her versatility. She had realized she was too limited, limited to throwing straight palms.

This wasn't particularly her fault; she had broken through to Martial Apprentice just a little after she turned fourteen. Although three years was not a short time. Learning and mastering Martial Apprentice techniques took an extremely long time, unless you were Rui, it had taken her a long time to develop the basics of her Martial Art.

The strike she'd landed on Vale had struck his diaphragm much to her fortune disorienting and incapacitating him.

BAM BAM BAM

She peppered him with more strikes, trying her best to ensure she didn't allow him to recover.

A well-placed impact to the diaphragm hindered breathing significantly, since it was the sole muscle responsible for the process of respiration.

BAM

POW

THWACK

BOOM

FWACK

POW

As she went on, it became clearer and clearer to everyone that the fight was going worse and worse for Vale. Following his brief mild, yet vital incapacitation, Fae exploited the opening to land a flurry of strikes on his vitals.

Throat.

Liver.

Solar Plexus.

Lower jaw.

Philtrum.

Glabella.

BAM BAM BAM

She launched a final combo. A straight palm into the diaphragm, an uppercut palm attack to the jaw, and a final palm strike into his throat.

Vale staggered for half a second, before collapsing to his knees and then flat onto his face.

What happened next drew the attention of every Martial Artist.

BAM

She launched a final palm strike pumped up with power straight down onto the skull of the unconscious man.

CRACK

Without any Apprentice-level techniques, the human body would simply be crushed by Fae's sheer raw power.

For moment, all the fights paused as the Martial Artists glanced at Vale's mangled skull atop a pool of blood and cranial fluid.

Martial Artists of the Martial Union and the Lowminer Industries inwardly rejoiced, while the bandits felt their heart sinking as cold terror and despair had begun to engulf them.

Everybody knew that the outcome for the first fight would decide the outcome of all fights. The reason was rather simple. The victor of that battle would go on to aid their comrades, adding another force that they would have to deal with.

If Vale had managed to kill Fae, then he would have been able to supplement his comrades. The battle would have gone from eight against four, to seven against four. Making life much easier for the bandits.

"That idiot...!" Feilin cursed.

Now that Fae had won, she would be coming to reinforce one of the three ongoing fights.

The bandits were already having a hard time fighting their opponents, especially with Milliana and Dalen regularly chipping in to either kill away any brief advantage they gained or put them in a worser position.

With someone as strong as her coming into one of their fights, another one of them was guaranteed to die.

Feilin, Han and Rajak kept an eye on her, looking to see which fight she would join.

Her decision was quick.

STEP

She leapt towards Rajak at top speed.

BAM

She slammed him with her most powerful attack, expecting atleast significant damage.

Alas, Rajak was not a trivial man. He slammed her attack while also partially dodging, a combination of both ensured her attack missed cleanly.

BAM

He struck her with immense force, sending her flying away despite her block.

She quickly repositioned herself, forming a triangle with Rui and Kane.

It was now three-on-one.