

## Martial Unity 91

### Chapter 91: Missions

"Here's the application form." She provided him with set of sheets of paper. "Do you possess an Academic statement from the academics department?"

"I'm afraid not." he shook his head. "Should I go procure one?"

"Not necessary." She assured. "We can acquire the documents ourselves, it's just the process can be expedited if provided. Still, it's not an issue."

Rui nodded before heading over to a desk reading through the application thoroughly. It had several pages, the first page was all about mundane and basic personal information. Name, age, date of birth, sex and other standard pieces of information needed by most applications and forms of this nature.

The second page was a bit more interesting. It was centered around his personal affinities as defined by him. He needed to describe his Martial Art, list out his techniques and preferences.

The third page asked him to list out preferred mission parameters; distance from Academy, mission timeframe, class etc.

The final page was a page of certain terms and agreements that he had to agree to in order to receive a license.

Rui speedily filled out the application form with a provided ink pen before eagerly returning it to the staff member.

"We'll get back to you within the day." She informed him.

Rui nodded, before a thought occurred to him. "Can I visit the mission library?" He asked.

"Sure, you can." She assured.

Rui nodded, rejoicing inwardly. He immediately asked for directions before heading over to the mission library. The mission library belonged to a part of the Academy that Rui had never been to before, Rui recalled that he wasn't allowed to enter this portion of the Academy when he initially toured it with Kane, specifically because he wasn't an Apprentice. Once he had become an Apprentice he had completely forgotten about it.

"So, this place was the mission library huh?" Rui muttered to himself as he approached the large facility. The guards didn't bat an eye at him after taking a look at his Apprentice uniform, as he entered the library. He opened the large doors and took his first view of the library.

"This is not what I pictured..." He murmured.

The mission library reminded of him a corporate office with immense paperwork, from his previous life. There was an immense amount of information squeezed into a tiny place.

The structure of the library was pentagonal, split into five sections each dedicated to a different class of missions. Each mission bill was placed vertically in shelves with its information as well as a brief description of the mission itself.

Each section representing a class was divided into ten layers, each representing a grade of difficulty of missions. Grade one missions were the easiest, whereas grade ten missions were the most difficult.

Each mission was coded with a certain set of coordinates, this corresponded to five copies of a large map of the town of Hajin and surrounding lands. The map was crisscrossed by numbered latitude and longitude in an elementary coordinate system. The coordinates on each mission bill indicated in what region of the map was the mission location, if any, was.

Each mission was also marked with a date of submission, indicating what date the commission from the customer was accepted by the Martial Union. This allowed Martial Artists to see whether the mission was recently accepted or not.

Each mission also had estimated timeframe indicated on it. Rui figured this is how Kane picked a mission that would last longer than the Winter holidays.

Another thing Rui noted was that there were a lot of empty slots for mission bills in the shelves, in fact, a solid half of all slots were empty at this point in time. This indicated that a lot of Martial Apprentices, inside or outside the Martial Academy were constantly accepting missions and that the Martial workforce at the Apprentice-level was able to cope with the demand for Martial services.

This was a good thing. Rui didn't think that it would be good for the Martial Union if the supply of these Martial services far exceeded the demand for these services, or if the demand for these services far exceeded the supply.

The latter was something he was less certain about. Perhaps Martial Artists were better off living in a world where demand for Martial services were astronomically higher than the supply, thus Martial Art would become a much more coveted skillset, and Martial Artists would enjoy a higher status in society. However, there would have to be extremely high amounts of conflict in a society for this to be the case. Rui wasn't sure he wanted himself and especially his family to live in such extremely dangerous societies.

He was satisfied with the current balance of supply and demand. The demand for Martial Artists was still quite high in reality. There were several markets that provided missions; domestic markets, within the country. International markets from the many much smaller and weaker nations without a strong united Martial group or association like that of the Kandrian Empire. The Royal Family by the terms of the Kandrian Martial Covenant was also a huge regular source of missions that sustained the Martial Union commercially.

There was no fear of the demand dwindling either. The Panama Continent contained a vast number of countries, nations, states and smaller settlements and groups with an inconceivable amount of conflict of interests that bred a huge amount of the demand for Martial force. Furthermore, significant swathes of the Panama Continent, particularly towards the continent and heartland held incredibly powerful monster species that would annihilate all of human civilization if not for the collective Martial power of humanity.

A large number of missions were bred not by conflict but by greed for natural resources. Be it fauna, flora or land-borne resources within the depths of the continent. Most of these resources were housed in incredibly dangerous environments that only Martial Artists could tread.

The demand for Martial Art would never die, Rui concluded.

## Chapter 92: A Closer Look

Rui shook his head, dismissing the irrelevant thoughts flying through his head. He scanned the library, wondering where to begin.

"Well, I guess I can just start with whatever." Rui shrugged.

He walked over the defense class section, nonchalantly sauntering across the shelves as he scanned the basic information displayed, eyeing each mission as he passed them.

[Defense class: Bodyguard mission

Difficulty grade: 3

Target of protection: Hilla Viona

Specified/estimated Location/range of mission: Within a radius of 20 kilometers of (28.5, 19.8)

Time period of mission: 1 week.

Mission commencement: Immediate

Successful completion remuneration: 80 silver coins/ 208 Martial Credits

Skillset pre-requisites: two Apprentice-level defense-oriented techniques.]

...

[Defense class: Guard mission.

Difficulty grade: 3

Target of security: Residential front gate.

Stated/estimated Location/range of mission: (2.875, 4.978)

Time period of mission: 1 month

Mission commencement date: Winter 28th/ 416

Successful completion remuneration: 192 silver coins/500 Martial credits

Skillset pre-requisites: one Apprentice-level defense-oriented technique]

...

[Defense class: Transporter mission:

Difficulty grade: 2

Target of transportation: Unspecified box with dimensions 5cm x 3cm x 6cm. Fragile

Starting/ending point and distance of travel: Town of Hajin to Town of Gadak; 120 kilometers.

Mission Commencement date: Winter 42nd/416

Successful remuneration: 28 silver coins/72 Martial credits

Skillset pre-requisites: one Apprentice-level defense-oriented technique and one Apprentice-level maneuvering-oriented technique.]

...

"Hmmm..." Rui browsed through each mission one-by-one, taking his time. He was quite fascinated by the organization and structure to the categorization of missions, allowing for remarkable ease of access of missions that fell into the preference of Martial Artists looking to complete missions.

The information displayed alongside the mission bills were merely the most basic pertinent pieces of information that allowed for a quick judgement of whether a mission was desirable or not. This allowed for quick assortment and distribution of missions.

Rui was surprised by the variety of missions within the defense class. The defense class of missions always sounded like it would be lacking in variety and diversity. But he was shown to be wrong. There were many types of defense-oriented missions within the class. Bodyguarding, guarding, transportation, patrolling and several other types. Even within these types, the difference in mission variables could lead to vastly differing circumstances of each particular mission.

This seemed to be true even with bodyguarding. The difference in the target profile could be huge, causing huge variations in the mission. Some bodyguard mission had targets who travelled a lot, this usually increased the graded difficulty of the mission from what Rui could observe. Static missions where the target of the mission largely remained within a smaller area made it easier to avoid variables that could not be accounted for.

Guarding missions were much more straightforward. The target was either a location or an object, usually not discreet. These jobs were generally of lower difficulty grades as well as lower remuneration.

What fascinated Rui was the transportation and patrolling missions. These missions were of much higher difficulty grades. Ranging in the layers of the defense class section that were closer to the center of the pentagon shaped library. Many of these missions were of much higher grades than what a newbie Apprentice like himself would be able to access. He wasn't sure how high or low his grade would end up evaluated to be. But surely it would be still be on the lower end.

These missions were extravagant because they were the kind of missions that only the upper echelons of the economy could afford and would afford. Who the hell would hire a Martial Artist to make deliveries otherwise? The rich had more than enough wealth to splurge on lower-realm martial Artists and were the only ones with enough reason to splurge on such ostentatious services. A lot of the wealthier clients of the Martial Union were in possession of objects or data and information that was extremely important. The transportation of highly valuable goods was also not a trivial matter. The possibility of targeted thefts and robberies were not low in such circumstances.

Rather than come out more sorry than safe, they reduced the probability of tragedies with Martial Artists.

Having had his fill with the defense class, Rui quickly made his way to the offense class of missions with engrossed eyes. He thought he knew what to expect, but he quickly realized he was wrong!

"Excuse me..." Rui called out to a support staff. "Why are there so few missions of the offense class?"

Most of the slots were empty! What was going on?

"You must be new here." He calmly replied. "Assault and battery are still felonies, even for Martial Artists. The Martial Union cannot accept civilian-commissioned missions of the offense class that are within the borders of Kandrian Empire."

"Yet there exists an offense class categorization of missions despite this..." Rui quickly connected the dots with the other information he knew, before coming to a conclusion. "Which means all offense-class are commissioned through Royal authorization, by the Royal Family..."

He recalled that the one of the clauses of the Kandrian Martial Covenant specified the exchange of Martial services, among other things, from the Martial Union to the Royal Family in exchange for funds, resources and privileges.

The staff member nodded. "That and foreign missions. But you're still a few realms too low for that option."

Rui figured as much, he put that aside focusing on the royal commissions. He knew that a lot of the laws still applied to Martial Artists, they merely gained partial impunity to the penalties; receiving much more authorized leniency from the judicial systems as far as sentencing went.

However, this did not necessarily mean that the offense class missions were lesser in number than the other class of missions. Running a country was impossible without state-sanctioned violence, the Kandrian Empire likely pawned off a portion of the less fundamental duties that involved assault like perhaps the war on the mafia and the black market of the nation.

If this was the case, Rui even thought it was a bit of a smart move on the Kandrian Empire's end. Both the underworld and the Martial Union were eyesores to the Royal Family. The best thing to do was to let them handle each other.

The only thing Rui hoped was that the Martial Union was charging the Royal Family a bomb of a price for this particular duty!

#### Chapter 93: Approved

Rui moved on to the remaining three sections, and he found interesting quirks about each of them.

Hunting missions at the Apprentice-level were all exclusively domestic missions, despite the fact that most hunting missions in general were beyond the borders of the Kandrian Empire, since most beast species exist beyond human settlements. However, those were too far above his paygrade.

The hunting missions he had access to were all domestic in nature. These included verified sightings of beasts that posed too much of a threat to civilians, or an overpopulation of certain beast species in certain parts of the forests and other natural habitats.

The Kandrian Empire hadn't exterminated every single dangerous beast species, mostly because it was not viable. For better or worse, the beast species of these natural environments were extremely vital to the balance, health and the maintenance of these environments.



These species usually played extremely important roles in the fragile ecosystems and food chains. Haphazardly and carelessly annihilating every trace of them would be a foolish blunder that could cause such ecological disasters that could very well bring the entire kingdom to its knees!

This was a much worse problem than the beast species themselves. Beast species were a much simpler and easier problem to handle than such a complex ecological catastrophe. Martial Art could handle former, it could not handle the latter!

The Royal Family even authorized the establishment of a Ministry of Ecology and Environment. Among the many tasks and duties this executive entity was responsible for, coordinating with the Martial Union through Royal authorization to regulate the populations and distributions of beast species was one of them.

A lot of hunting missions were centered around extraction of valuable resources. This included flora and fauna resources that were dangerous to obtain, and thus required Martial Artists. However, beyond this, Rui realized that the hunting class of missions at the Apprentice-level were limited in variety and diversity.

"There's a limit to the variety of flora and fauna in the true wild natural environments outside the borders of the Empire, and flora and fauna within the Empire." Rui murmured. He wasn't sure at what realm would he be qualified to be able to take hunting missions occurring outside.

He dismissed these thoughts, moving onto the two remaining sections once he was satisfied with his exploration of the hunting section.

The covert operations section fell within his expectations, for once. The missions were centered around clandestine and furtive missions. Shadowing, reconnaissance, tracking, infiltration etc were the kinds of missions that populated this class of missions.

He was surprised by the fact that these missions were legal, while the offense class wasn't. But it made more sense when he considered the Kandrian Empire wasn't Earth. On Earth, the right to privacy and physical and intellectual property were protected by the state. However, the Kandrian Empire and most sovereign states he had some awareness about were culturally and politically centuries behind Earth during his lifetime. These rights that were fundamental and extremely important back on Earth were not that important here. Part of it had to do with the lack of communication technology and information technology, slowing down development and allowing missions like these to be legal.

Out of the four classes of missions thus far, this was the one class of missions he was least qualified to undertake. The pre-requisites for these missions required stealth-oriented maneuvering techniques, of which he had none and didn't intend to get any.

His interest in this class of missions was the least, after all, he was a martial arts fanboy, not a spy fanboy!

Having had his fill, he left the section before heading out to the last section.

The miscellaneous class of missions.

This was the class of missions that he was least familiar with, intuitively. He had of course learnt about it in the theory lessons mandated in the Exploration Stage. However, since the missions of this class did not share any common trait, besides from not smoothly falling into the other four classes of missions, it was hard to even come up with a picture of what the missions of this class might look like.

"Well, this is just chaos." Rui chuckled as he scanned missions, walking around in the section.

The missions were all across the board with no common element or pattern unifying the entire class. The Academy had done its best to lump missions of a similar kind together. Grouping missions that had some degree of raw manual labour together, lumping missions that were required services of Martial Artists that had nothing to do with actually using their Martial Art.

"This one wants an interview with a Martial Apprentice." Rui laughed mirthfully as he skimmed through a particular aisle.

He shook his head. The Martial Union must have created this class because there were too many weird and strange commissions. Rui wondered why any Martial Artist would ever come to this strange class of missions instead of the primary four.

This was, until he noticed why.

"The remuneration proportion of this class is higher than the others..." He noticed, understanding why Martial Artists ventured into this class.

Money.

Not only was the miscellaneous class of missions, by far, the safest, they were also quite remunerative in comparison the classes, pound-for-pound.

This attracted just enough Martial Artists to this class of missions to ensure that supply of Martial Artists matched the number of missions of that class.

Rui was not particularly interested in this class of missions either.

"Guess I will be primarily focusing on offense, defense and hunting primarily."

As he lurked around gathering his thoughts, he realized how he was surprised by how different each class of missions was. He'd expected each class to be relatively similar in all aspects besides from the fundamental differences between them, but this was not the case.

"They were incongruent from each other in many different ways."

The defense class was the most normal and diverse class of missions. It had fairly well-distributed client-base, it had a decent amount of variety and diversity. Furthermore, it was the only class that was not limited in the Apprentice Realm.

The offense class at the Apprentice Realm was entirely Royally authorized, making a very singular source of commissions. At the Apprentice Realm it was also limited to the town that the Apprentices operated in.

Hunting missions were also limited to the Kandrian Empire, and their difficulty and variety were also largely reduced.

Covert operations had the most troublesome skill pre-requisites among all of them

As for the miscellaneous class...

"The less said about the better." Rui shook his head, before a voice called out to him.

"Apprentice Rui Quarrier." A support staff member called out to him. "Your application has been approved and your learner's license has been registered." She said, handing him an envelope.

"You may now accept a mission."

Chapter 94: Bodyguard

"I can pick a mission as of this very moment?"

"Indeed, as long as the difficulty grade does not exceed our evaluation of your capability to complete missions."

Rui noted her choice of words. "How does the Academy evaluate our capability to complete missions and how is it measured?"

"The Academy evaluates mission-completing competence by looking at academic records, compatibility between Martial Artist and mission, experience and mission track record. Your evaluation is indicated on a grade from 1-10, just like missions." She explained.

Rui nodded. "Am I qualified to jump right into missions even if I have never attempted one before?"

"Yes, however the Martial Academy strongly recommends beginning with the lowest of difficulty grades of missions for your initial missions, regardless of your Martial skill, it's best to steadily accumulate experience with the process of mission completion before undertaking missions of higher difficulty grade."

"I see." Rui nodded. "I believe I need only pick a mission bill and have it assigned to me in the commission department, correct?"

"Yes."

"Alright, thank you."

"If you have any additional questions, you can read the mission completion guide created by the Martial Academy to learn more." She said, handing him a small booklet. "Or you can approach the Commissions Department for clarification."

"Got it, thank you." Rui said as he began reading the mission completion guide.

Thankfully the mission completion guide was not an extremely elaborate read. It mainly focused on basic mission completion protocol. Pre-commencement protocols, mission protocols and post-completion/failure protocols to ensure smooth management. It was only thanks to ever Martial Artists following these protocols that the Martial Union could smoothly and speedily function as a whole.

Pre-commencement protocols involved registration as the assigned Martial Artist to the commission, it involved recording the time of dispatch, verification with the client, recording the time of commencement.

Mid-mission protocols were more norms rather than rules about how to go about different kinds of the most common missions among different classes.

Post-completion/failure protocols were report submissions and remuneration protocols.

"Simple stuff." Rui shut the book, having speedily digested it. "Now time to pick a mission." he muttered to himself excitedly. After a year of training in the Academy, he had finally reached the stage where he could complete a mission!

"I'm graded three, huh?" Rui scratched his head. He wasn't entirely sure what that meant. He lacked the necessary context and experience to discern what it meant. Maybe he could ask Kane, Fae and Milliana

their evaluated grades so he can have a frame of reference to understand how much the Academy actually evaluated him to be.

"Well, I don't intend to pick a grade three mission right off the bat."

For his first mission, he decided to pick the most straightforward mission possible. He did not grow arrogant and assume that he would be able to nail the mission because he was oh-so-great.

"Grade one is the way to go." he concluded. "But what class?"

He eyed each section, carefully considering them.

"Covert ops and miscellaneous are a definite no-go." Rui had no intention of being a shadow or a weirdo for his very important first mission.

"Assault is also a no-go." He didn't want to engage in royally-authorized missions for his very first mission.

"That leave defense and hunting class." Rui concluded, before making his decision.

"Hunting class missions are much less straightforward and have more sophisticated objectives and conditions and pre-requisites." For his very first mission, he wanted to be down to earth.

"Defense is the way to go." He decided.

He began scanning through the outer-most layer of the defense class section, the layer with grade one missions.

"Hm?" Rui squinted as he paused upon a mission bill.

[Defense class: Bodyguard mission

Difficulty grade: 1

Target of protection: Bella

Specified/estimated location/range of mission: within 30 kms radius of (2.5, -1.8)

Time Period of mission: 3 days

Mission commencement: immediate

Successful completion remuneration: 20 silvers / 52 Martial credits

Skillset pre-requisite: one apprentice-level defense-oriented technique]

It caught his eye because its remuneration was higher than most other missions of its grade, and it was relatively close to the Academy in comparison.

He picked up the bill from the slot, and flipped through it to learn more.

\* \* \* \* \*

"We haven't received any word from the Martial Union as of this yet, miss." A young woman anxiously reported.

The recipient of the report turned to face her handmaid with a grave expression. "If only I had enough money at hand for the rapid assignment fee."

There was usually a time period between the submission of the commission and the acceptance of the mission. This was usually anywhere between zero and three days. Thus, most clients of the Kandrian

Martial Union were accustomed to placing commissions well ahead in advance and specifying the date of the mission commencement. Thus, regardless of when it was accepted, the missions would commence when they wanted.

However, the Martial Union offered to have missions be accepted immediately in exchange for an extremely expensive fee relative to the mission to the cost.

"Miss Bella..." The handmaid sullenly responded.

"We even had to undersell the difficulty of the mission just a little to be able to pay the up-front expense." Bella sighed, hoping the Martial Union would not notice. "Thankfully we didn't violate the rules of the commission contract explicitly."

"We will have to wait here until the Martial Artist arrives." She gestured to the small quarters they were in. A toilet and a single bedroom were all they were able to afford in the hotel they were in.

"Do you intend to dispatch as soon as the Martial Artist bodyguard is dispatched?" Her handmaid asked with a worried expression.

"We have to." Bella nodded. "We will inevitably be discovered if remain here indefinitely. The sooner we leave, the lower our chance of being discovered. We need to get away the Town of Hajin as soon as possible." She glanced out the window. "The Lowminers have too much influence in Hajin. We need a Martial Artist who can stall their pursuers when they inevitably discover us."

She sighed.

"I hope our bodyguard arrives soon."

Chapter 95: Fashionably Late?

Bella Hier was the daughter of a wealthy merchant. Her father had moved to Town of Hajin, decades ago in hopes of making it big, and through many years of sustained effort and clever business, he had managed to achieve immense economic success.



The Hier Industries was a premium esoteric material supplier, this trading company acquired high-grade esoteric matter and resold them in manufacturers at remarkably high markups, earning huge profits with each exchange. Its journey to the top of Hajin was textbook execution, it established robust supply chains that minimized logistical and inventory burdens while maximizing supply.

It even managed to grasp retired Martial Artists to permanently join the company, drastically reducing the cost of acquisition of certain high grade esoteric resources that could only be acquired through Martial Artists, which would be quite expensive if done through the Martial Union.

The Hier family grew in wealth and commercial prosperity for quite a long time, even until recently.

Until recently, that was.

When the company began expanding into other esoteric resource industries, aggressively encroaching onto the space of more accomplished companies. It had bitten off more than it could chew, the Lowminers esoteric suppliers was a company that had competed against the Hier family. The entirety of the market of the Town of Hajin and the surrounding lands were the battle ground between these two behemoths.

However, their bitter struggle ended when the Lowminers managed to expand and monopolize certain esoteric markets quicker. The Lowminers managed to eventually to corner and suffocate the Hier family commercially, and eventually had enough capital to buy a huge proportion of the shares of the Hier family through various third-party entities, effectively ripping apart a chunk of its rival from it.

And that is when Bella Hier's life crumbled.

Her father passed away.

('No, he was murdered.') Bella clenched her fists

Her father died due to blunt force trauma caused by tripping and falling down staircases, and had died within seconds even before attendants who heard the noise came to help him. However, Bella was almost certain that this was staged and that he was assassinated without a doubt. Her father was an

extremely careful man. The idea that he would clumsily trip to such a degree that he died on the spot as a result was an absurd notion. She was certain that the Lowminers had a Martial Apprentice, since the Martial Union would never agree to accept such a commission.

What was beyond her expectations was that her father had long prepared a will, in the event he was to die. He had passed on all of his ownership of the Hier Industries to his daughter; Bella Hier.

This was outside the expectation of the Lowminers to some degree. Part of their goal was to cannibalize the remains of the Hier Industries to achieve complete dominion over the esoteric matter market of the Town of Hajin.

Now, the problem was no closer to being solved, not as long as Bella Hier was still alive. She, who had been groomed and raised as the successor of her father, grew pale when she read her father's will as she understood the consequences.

On one hand, her father had passed on his legacy to her.

On the other, she bore immense responsibility, and risk.

Especially risk at the current moment. Inheriting her father's dominant shares of the Hier Industries was effectively putting a target on her back. The Lowminers would come for her without a doubt.

She fled her home estate immediately. Her fears were confirmed when she received word that the Lowminers had broken into her estate. She immediately went into survival mode and began planning for her survival first and later her return.

('I need to leave Hajin immediately.') She had immediately concluded. The Lowminers were too powerful within the town of Hajin, if she stayed here, she would simply be too powerless to accomplish anything, and she would die quickly.

She had immediately charted out a plan to leave Hajin aiming to use her connections to the best she could, but the problem was that it was not really possible by herself, she would almost certainly be caught. Going to law enforcement wouldn't help, companies with economic might usually had ears inside the law-enforcement branches and even some degree of influence. Furthermore, without

concrete evidence of threat to her life she would not be able to obtain protection, the whole endeavor would be no different from announcing her presence to the Lowminers.

('That leaves the Martial Union.')

She sighed inwardly. The Martial Union was the strongest private association in the Kandrian Empire, a local behemoth limited to a single town or two had no influence on it. She would be able to commission a Martial Apprentice bodyguard through a third-person, her trusted attendant, and that is exactly what she did.

But there was a problem.

('The bodyguard isn't here yet.')

Bella gulped. She almost considered shifting, because staying in her current location for too long was too risky. Because of her sudden departure, and lack of the elaborate preparation she would have ideally liked, she had been unable to move in a discrete manner. She knew it was only a matter of time before the Lowminers narrowed down her possible locations and completely shut off any escape.

KNOCK KNOCK

Heavy pounding on the door drew her attention. She glanced warily as she heard a muffled dispute on the other side.

"Sir, you cannot barge into our establishment violating our and our customer's privacy! We will report you to law enforcement!"

KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK

"Open the door!" Another gruff voice insisted, ignoring the man's reprimands.

"Miss!" Her attendant urgently insisted. "You need to leave! Go!"

Bella did not hesitate as she opened a window and jumped out. She had purposely requested for a room on the ground floor with an unbarred window, so that she would have another escape route. Just as she landed, a burly voice called out to her.

"Going somewhere?" She turned around in terror as the man caught her, effortlessly restraining her.

"Let go of me!" She struggled

"Hehe." He chuckled as he dragged her towards the front of the hotel. "You've given us quite the trou-"

THWACK

Suddenly, she felt his grip over him loosening, watching as her apprehender wordlessly collapsed.

"Hm, you're definitely Bella Hier." The voice of a young boy rejoiced. "Thank god, it would be so embarrassing if I lost my client on my very first mission!"

She turned around in shock, standing face to face with a masked young boy who couldn't be older than fifteen, wearing the Martial uniform of the Martial Union.

"I don't know what kind of mess you've gotten yourself into, young lady." He said. "But we need to get out of here."

Chapter 96: Leave

"So this is the standard gear of the Martial Union, eh?" Rui glanced over to the items on the table in the dispatch facility. On the table was a mask, a uniform and a strange looking device.

The mask was optional, but highly recommended by the Academy to all Martial Apprentices. Many a times, the Martial Apprentices inevitably earned the ire and the grudge of powerful third-party organizations during their missions. Although these organizations had no power to do anything to the Martial Union as a whole, that wasn't necessarily true for individual Martial Artists.

Martial Artists were scary and untouchable to most people, but this wasn't truly the case for the more economically powerful. It was possible for these organizations to bully individual Martial Artists, especially the younger and lower Realm Martial Artists.

Thus, a mask was recommended to younger and weaker Martial Artists. The masks were designed to hide away all facial features without hindering vision or any of the other senses. In Rui's case, they even provided him a mask with a hair colour-changing function, specifically meant to hide unique or unnatural hair colors that would give away their identity.

Rui had accepted, even if this was a lower-graded mission, he did not want to take the risk. Although he himself might be secure because of his combat prowess, the same could not be said for his family back in the Orphanage who were vulnerable in comparison.

The uniform was supposed to be resistant to piercing-weapons, meant specifically for Apprentices. Apparently higher Realms were naturally resistant to piercing attacks and generally did not need any aid. The uniform bore the emblem of the Martial Union as well as the color scheme associated with Martial Apprentices.

The last object was rather strange. Rui had been told it was a device with which he could record the moment of dispatch, client verification, mission commencement and conclusion as well as mission failure or success. Rui could apparently record and relay the timing of these events through marked buttons on it. He could even send out SOS signals and request for emergency aid.

What shocked Rui about this was that this was the first time he had seen communication technology in this world!

He did not think it existed because he hadn't seen any hint of it during his life in the Orphanage or even in the bustling town of Hajin. But he was proven wrong, the fact that this was standard-issue equipment meant that this technology was much more prevalent than he had thought. It was quite likely that this technology was based on some esoteric resource or phenomenon, if the esoteric substances responsible for the communication technology were somewhat scarce, then it could explain why this technology wasn't ubiquitous.

The device allowed Rui and other Martial Artists to effectively and easily communicate with and update the Martial Union on the progress of the mission.

Once Rui completed all the procedures, it was time for the dispatch. After recording the timing and signing some paperwork, Rui began jogging to the location of the specified commencement destination. A little hotel in one of the outskirts districts of the town of Hajin.

As Rui made his way to the location of the assigned mission, the infrastructure and population density of the districts dipped progressively. Within an hour of using Parallel Walk and Balanced Direction tentatively, he could see the hotel.

('Such an offbeat and remote location, and yet they still want a bodyguard?') Rui pondered, before dismissing the thought. He was just grateful to have a mission, he had already made up his mind to make the best out of this mission no matter what!

He only noticed something strange when he reached the location, pausing at a distance. A gang of men had gotten into a conflict with who seemed to be the hotel owner.

('Bandits or robbers maybe?') Rui tilted his head as the men forced their way in despite the owner's protests. Rui resumed, sprinting towards the hotel. If these men had bad intentions, then his client was in danger too!

As he reached the hotel, he saw a young blue-haired lade creep out of the window.

('That hair color matches the account and sketch.!) Rui rejoiced, despite being confused, before panicking as she bumped into one of the men patrolling the parameter. What shocked Rui was that the man apprehended her and dragged her away.

THWACK

A Vital Pressure strike to the temple from a blind spot knocked the man out, giving him a concussion. He sighed in relief as he studied her.

"Hm, you're definitely Bella Hier." Rui nodded sighing relief. "Thank god, it would be so embarrassing if I lost my client on my very first mission!"

Kane and Fae would never let him hear the end of it!

"I don't know what kind of mess you've gotten yourself into, young lady." He solemnly added. "But we need to get out of here."

She stared at him with speechless confusion. "You... are my bodyguard?"

"Yes." Rui caught her hand. "No time! Let's g-"

"HEY! I FOUND HER." A man's voice loudly announced.

"Tsk." Rui tutted. "Too late. Guess I'll have to deal with them."

Thankfully Rui didn't sense any Martial Apprentices among them. Martial Apprentices did not possess an imperceivable aura or pressure that was as defined as that of a Martial Squire or Senior. But a Martial Apprentice like Rui could easily distinguish them from normal people.

"Careful! He has the Martial Apprentice uniform on!" The man warned the others as they huddled banded around.

Rui didn't waste any time. He sprinted over to them faster than they could effectively react before launching a Flowing Canon and knocking several of them flying away.

BAM BAM BAM

Rui weaved around, dodging their crude haymakers while cleanly punishing them Vital Pressure into especially vulnerable and painful areas left them flat on the ground or reeling completely open for swift strikes to the chin, knocking them out.

In the span of ten seconds, fifteen men had been taken down by a single adolescent boy. Bella stared dumbfoundedly at him as he wrapped up and walked back to her.

She had always been generally aware that Martial Artists were strong, but knowing that and actually witnessing them in live action were two different things. She was surprised that someone who appeared to be so young could already be a Martial Apprentice.

"Are you okay?" Rui stuck out his hand offering help, breaking her out of her reverie.

"I'm okay." She managed squeeze out, pulling herself up.

"Those men will wake up eventually, we need to get out of here quickly." Rui insisted. "We'll talk once we've reached a better place."

#### Chapter 97: Considerations

Bella shook herself out of her reverie and nodded seriously. Just then;

"Miss!" Her attendant called out.

"Puth, are you okay?" Bella asked, concerned, receiving a nod in return. Thankfully the men had merely had her open the door and snoop around looking for their target and left when they couldn't find her.

Bella glanced back at Rui. "We need to leave this district immediately. I'm heading south, towards the outskirts of the town before catching a cargo carriage towards the neighbouring town of Laxus. We need you to accompany and protect us within Hajin." She insisted.

Rui nodded. "We can talk later. Right now, we seriously need to go." he said, before turning to face Puth. "However, you are not under my protection and having more people will only slow us down."

Bella grimaced, slowly nodding before turning to her attendant. "Puth, I cannot have you accompany us any further. The journey will be too dangerous, return back home." Not giving her attendant any choice in the matter.

She turned back to Rui, before nodding. "Let's leave."



Rui nodded in return. "You're too slow, I'm going to need to carry you until we reach find a rickshaw or reach a place we can lay low."

"Eh?"

"Time is of the essence."

He swooped in, lifting her in a princess-carry, before activating Balanced Direction, Parallel Walk and Helical Breathing. Despite the hindrance and burden, he was still able to sprint at a speed beyond the human limit. In the meantime, Bella awkwardly held onto him embarrassed as she tried not to let her grip slip at those immense speeds.

It wasn't that Rui wasn't cognizant of her awkwardness, or even his own. But it wasn't important. Her life and the mission was at stake, only a fool would let something like embarrassment get in the way of success.

"Was it okay to not kill those men?" She asked a pertinent question.

"If this was an ordinary bodyguard mission, it wouldn't be a problem." Rui stated. "Problem is mass murder is extremely high key and will draw far too much attention. Law enforcement officers will be all over the place and will be out looking for us and even the Martial Union might be involved, and not in a good way. Killing them will draw even more attention to us and make a clean escape much, much harder. It's better to just leave them, and do our best to reach your destination."

Bella was young, not a fool. "Furthermore, the policing officers would only take us in, have us make statements before releasing us without protection, since we cannot produce evidence of ill-intent on my life and well-being. You're right, killing them has more downsides than upsides."

Rui nodded silently. In truth, there was an even greater reason he had chosen not to kill them.

He was not prepared to.

He had never killed a single person in his life, he had never felt the urge to, besides from the instance of kidnapping in his childhood.

He was glad that there was solid rationale to leave them alive, he wasn't sure he would be able to kill them one-by-one.

He inwardly sighed. ('This is a problem I'll need to fix. The Martial World is filled with death. There are those who kill, and there are those who will be killed. I need to fall into the former group, not the latter.')

Thankfully he still had some time before he would be forced to make that choice. He needed to condition and train a mindset that was willing to kill if needed. It's not that Rui was an extremely pacifist or kind person, but as a person who spent fifty-nine years in a world where murder was deeply abhorrent, it was not easy to become comfortable with killing.

Despite carrying another human, Rui was able to reach the closest district fairly quickly. He even avoided routes where they would inevitable be seen and would draw attention.

"You need to cut or hide your hair." Rui insisted. "That drastically lowers the chances of someone being able identify and remember us if your pursuers ever investigate in this district."

She nodded, tying up her hair as tightly as she could before covering it with a cloth garment she had. "You need to get rid of that uniform as well, that will draw attention since Martial Apprentices are rarely spotted in these remote districts."

Half an hour later they had checked into a cheap inn. Rui had long taken off his mask, wearing clothes that Bella had quickly bought from the closest inn, while covering his hair with a tied cloth like Bella had. His hair was too attention-drawing and distinct, not to mention the annoying superstitions that would, no doubt, make this mission harder.

Both of them had ensured that there were no distinct traits that would allow the Lowminer gangs to be able to identify them and recount information should they be questioned.

"It's time for us to talk." Rui said, sitting at the other side of the room. "The more you reveal, the better I'll be able to guarantee your safety."

Bella sighed. "What do you want to know, specifically?"

"The scope, power, influence and a general threat evaluation of your pursuers." Rui replied. "Your objectives and plans. Remember, the maximum timeframe of the mission is three days, I can't hang around you forever."

Bella nodded, sighing. "I'm being pursued by a large powerhouse in the esoteric industry of the town of Hajin. Although unclear, they have connections to the mafia and often employ gang violence indirectly. Their objective should ideally be my capture alive, allowing them to coerce me into handing over my shares one way or another."

Rui nodded, in thought. "That man was definitely trying to apprehend you."

"As for my plans. My father's company has branches in towns where the Lowminers haven't expanded yet. My greatest likelihood of survival would be to reach those branches and consolidate safely." She explained.

"I have a few questions, if you don't mind."

"Go ahead."

## Chapter 98: Answers

"First, if the Hier family has branches in this town of Hajin as well as outskirt towns, why bother going to those towns instead of your Hajin branch?" He asked, unable to make sense of her decision.

"I was in my personal penthouse when I received the news, I had immediately fled the estate with as much of my immediate personal savings as I could." Bella explained. "I heard that roughly ten-fifteen minutes later the estate was that gangs of men had arrived at my personal home. There is no way they would not account for me going to the Hier Industries branches. Furthermore, with an ownership of

decent number of shares of the company, they have some degree of authority and influence on its executive operations. Because of this, it would be easy for them to trap and capture me if I attempted to visit the Hajin branch."

Rui nodded, this made sense.

"Is that why you were only able to commission a single Martial Apprentice?"

Bella nodded. "I never had access to the immense amounts of wealth of Hier Industries, I'm only seventeen-years-old after all. My father was always strict because he believed that spoiling me with great personal wealth would prevent me from becoming a worthy successor. The wealth I used to commission a bodyguard from the Martial Union was all wealth of my earning." Bella sighed. "If I had much more time, I would have been able to reach the branch and consolidate my position while hiring multiple high-grade Martial Apprentices. But alas, it was mostly too late."

Rui understood why she appeared to be such a pauper despite being the daughter of a bigshot, the information provided by the mission bill as well as what Bella had told him had finally given him a fully understanding of the situation. "Alright, what branch are you aiming to head for?"

"The Laxus town branch." Bella replied. "It's a town where the Lowminer Industries haven't expanded to yet, mainly because the market doesn't conform to their established areas. Their power and influence should be considerably hampered. Using gangs haphazardly will not be taken well by the local mafia of Laxus."

Rui nodded, this was probably her best chance of success in her circumstances. "There's just one issue. The mission range is limited to within a thirty kilometers radius. I can't exceed that, meaning I can only protect you a part of the way."

Bella nodded, expecting this. "I'm aware of that, I was cognizant of it when I commissioned the bodyguard mission. Increasing the range and timeframe of the mission increases the cost of the mission, I had to choose a good balance between the timeframe and the range of the mission. There would be no point in commissioning a mission with a high range but extremely low timeframe, or a mission with a high timeframe and low radius. Eventually I decided that three days and thirty kilometers was a good balance. Thirty kilometers is enough to escort me out of Hajin safely, which is the hardest part. Once I'm out the Lowminers are constrained and limited. I have a decently solid chance of succeeding as long as I'm careful."

Rui nodded. "Alright, what route are you planning to take in order to escape Hajin?" Ordinarily, the bodyguard was supposed to make decisions regarding the safety of the client of protection. But in this case Rui digressed and left the decision in her hands, she was clearly much more knowledgeable and quite clever herself.

And hot.

Rui shook his head, sighing inwardly. ('These dumb hormones are fucking with me.')

The amount of testosterone per unit blood escalated astronomically in boys between the ages of twelve to twenty-one before gradually reducing over the rest of their life span resulting in an exaggeratedly high libido. Thankfully, Rui's mind, by virtue of going through a second round of growth had strengthened its fortitude and reduced its susceptibility to influences such as hormones, for the most part. Though he was only resistant, not immune. Boys will be boys.

Bella brought out a map. "I was considering routes that included going through both the most populated and the least populated districts."

Rui frowned. "Doesn't it make more sense to stick to the least populated districts of Hajin due to how few people there are?"

Bella shook her head. "Not necessarily. If our disguises are even halfway decent. Finding us in high population-density urban districts will be a nightmare. However, if our identities are compromised then more remote districts are more advantageous, because it is harder to be hidden in more remote locations."

Rui nodded, this made sense. "In that case, a perfect disguise in urban districts where we blend perfectly into the background masses, as long as we don't have to verify our identities at any point, they should struggle to find us."

Bella nodded. "Exactly."

"Alright, what about exiting Hajin and reaching Laxus?" Rui asked. "There's no way you're going to make it by foot."

"I have a strong connection to a local small-scale goods transportation company, I plan to request the director, a close acquaintance of my father and mine, to smuggle me outside Hajin and inside Laxus without detection." Bella explained. "After that, I'll manage myself."

Rui nodded. This had spelled the end of all the doubts he had. The air grew silent and awkward as they ran out of topics to converse about.

"We should freshen up and eat up a bit before disguising ourselves for the next journey stretch." Rui said. "I only have three standard low-grade rejuvenation potions and one healing potion for the bodyguard mission, I don't have any to share with you unfortunately."

"No need to apologize." Bella sighed. "It's not your fault."

As Bella went to the bathroom to freshen up a little, Rui contemplated about the mission. The mission difficulty was definitely not a meagre one, that was for sure. However, this wasn't much of a grievance to Rui for one main reason; the Martial Union compensated Martial Artists for underpriced missions!

This meant that as long as Rui was able to show that the mission's difficulty exceeded the evaluation of the Martial Union, he would receive even more Martial Credits! Allowing him to purchase even better techniques!

Rui grinned like a shark at the thought.

Chapter 99: Danger standing by

"Damn it!" A curse echoed through the room.

Had Feron Lowminer known the Hier girl was as slippery as she was, he would have been much more careful than he already was. But he didn't, and here he was.

He had a bad feeling in his gut when he heard that Bella Hier was not at her personal home, and that she had hastily departed once she had learnt of her father's death. It was odd behaviour, what kind of daughter hastily ran away from home without announcing her destination after learning of her father's death?

Why wasn't there a period of mourning? Rather than grief, her behavior indicated fear.

All this strongly suggested that she had already figured out her predicament, and had taken pre-emptive measures to protect herself.

And she had surpassed his expectations, she managed to escape immediate capture and had remained hidden well enough and long enough to hire a Martial Apprentice from the Martial Union, remarkably raising the difficulty of her capture.

Martial Apprentices could not be defeated by ordinary men, not without a huge numeric advantage, and even then, it would require truly remarkable and advantageous circumstances to succeed.

"Only Martial Artists can defeat Martial Artists..." Feron grunted, before glancing at a dark figure at the corner of the room. "Isn't that right, Azazel?"

The shadowy figure nodded mildly, not saying a word.

"Remain on standby, if and when the girl slips up, I expect you to finish the job." Feron coldly stated. "Kill her and the pesky Martial Apprentice."

\* \* \* \* \*

Rui tied up his hair tightly, preventing even a strand of his unique hair from slipping and out. Protecting his identity had become an even greater deal now that he knew he was dealing with powerful third parties with whom he had a strong conflict of interest. He was not going to take any chances, a single blunder may very well come back to bite him in the ass.

His ears pricked as he heard some noises come from the other room.

('Bella?') He turned with a puzzled look as he was about to open the bathroom, when he froze.

('She's crying.')

He realized, as he heard her muffled sobs.

An awkward expression crawled onto his face. He wasn't sure what to do, he wasn't close to her, he didn't know her whatsoever, he was here to complete a job and would leave once his time was up, regardless of her situation.

Furthermore, he had never consoled anyone before, on anything, especially a teenager. Let alone on something as heavy as their father's death.

He shook his head, deciding to avoid it. He made a big fuss as he was about to open the door, making a lot of noise with something or the other, giving her enough of a forewarning that he was about to come out, allowing her to hastily clean herself up.

"Are you ready?" He asked, pretending as if he knew nothing. She nodded with a steeled expression; an expression Rui inwardly sighed at.

('Seems like she's pulled herself together, that's a good sign.')

Rui had left the core of the planning to her, if her emotional state was too unreliable, he might decide to take matters into his own hand.

"Once we get to the next district, we'll have to change our clothes once again, just to be safe." She told him.

Rui nodded. "The next district is district fourteen, I believe?"

Bella nodded. "District fourteen is a disproportionately commercial compared to other outer districts of Hajin, there's a huge influx and outflux of traders, merchants, suppliers, transporters and consumers. The two of us won't stand out in anyway, and as long as we keep our heads low, the Lowminers should find it almost impossible to track us."



Rui glanced at her in thought. "You mentioned your connection to the director of a small-scale goods transportation company. Where is he situated?"

"In district twenty-three, a district in the outermost layer of the town of Hajin."

"Can you trust him?" Rui asked cautiously.

She nodded in response. "I've known him my entire life, my father and him went way back having known each other for decades."

Rui shrugged mildly, if she thought he was trustworthy, then he could only follow her lead.

"What about our means of transport?"

"We'll have to travel by foot until we meet with the director of the I mentioned, after that we can probably get some transportation."

"You think you can make it that far in a few days?" Rui asked.

"I have no choice but to." She sighed, putting an end to their conversation. The two of them made some final preparations.

Rui was actually wearing his Martial Uniform under his disguise for protection, while concealing the mask within his baggy clothes. The disguise hindered his movement just a little, but that little cost of mobility was worth the benefits. It would be much more of a pain if the Lowminers managed to track them because of reports of a travelling Martial Apprentice with a woman with concealed hair.

Their next goal was two districts away, both of them had agreed to not bother with longer breaks within transit and take shorter breaks and longer stretches in their journey.

Once they began, it had taken them almost an hour and a half at a brisk walking pace to reach the next district. Bella had grown far more exhausted than she had anticipated. Having lived a lifestyle that rarely required her to push herself to her physical limits.

Eventually she grew so tired that she almost collapsed, and required Rui to carry her once more. He then had to take a roundabout route through district fourteen so that they would avoid drawing attention in the densely populated district.

"Aren't you exhausted?" She panted lightly as she held on to him. "You came all the way from the Academy on foot prior."

Rui glanced at her with a slight grin. "That's the best part of being an Apprentice, it takes a lot of for us to get tired!"

Chapter 100: Pay

"Did you take a rejuvenation potion?" She asked, tilting her head squinting her brown eyes with curiosity. "You did mention you had some."

Rui shook his head. "Those were for rejuvenating the mind, negating the need to sleep."

Bella nodded, well familiar with mental rejuvenation potions herself. "How do you have so much stamina?"

"It comes from honing my stamina through strict intense physical training, and also from an Apprentice-level Martial Art technique called Helical Breathing." Rui explained. "It saves increases efficiency of energy consumption, allowing you to accomplish the same results with less effort."

"Hmmm..." Bella nodded. "Must be nice to be a Martial Artist. You have so much power, you must feel incredibly secure and confident."

Rui thought about her words. It was true to some degree, unless his opponent was a Martial Apprentice, there wasn't much that ordinary humans could do. However, it wasn't something he really thought of.

He never began his voyage down his Martial Path in order to obtain more physical power. His goal was to practice and develop his Martial Art forever, just that alone gave him true elation and fulfillment.

The physical security was ultimately just a good bonus, it was not his motivation or his goal.

Furthermore, having spent most of his time in the Academy since he became an Apprentice, he hadn't experienced much of the sense of increased security. Since as soon as he broke through to Martial Apprentice, he was immediately booted out of the Exploration Stage and shipped to the Apprentice section. He was immediately surrounded by Martial Apprentices who initially all much stronger than him.

There were, of course, the Martial Apprentices of his batch, who were all stronger than him. Then there were Martial Apprentices of the senior batches who had accumulated more techniques and experience than the Martial Apprentices of his own batch.

It was not easy to feel physically secure when all of your peers were stronger than you.

The only time he had spent outside the Academy was when he went home for the winter break, but that was incredibly brief, he hadn't really had much time to actually introspect on how the world appeared to him now that he was a Martial Apprentice.

However, now that he thought more about it, he had become more cognizant of this feeling. He had a decently strong sense of security in this mission. As a Martial Apprentice, realistically only another Martial Apprentice could threaten him, and this mission would be, at the very least, a grade four on the difficulty scale if there were other Martial Apprentices were involved, reaching potentially much higher.

Of course, there was always the possibility that a Martial Apprentice, but that was extremely unlikely given that this a low-grade mission, so he was alert, but still relaxed.

"The sense of security is good." Rui admitted.

Bella nodded. "I'm a little envious, this catastrophe has shown me how helpless I am."

"By yourself, you are helpless, like all humans." Rui straightforwardly affirmed. "But once you consolidate your position within the Hier Industries, your power would far exceed mine. There is more than one kind of power, I pursue Martial Art because I love Martial Art, and not because of the power it gives me."

"Oh?" Bella's eyebrow lifted? "You didn't strike me as the fiery passionate type."

Rui chuckled. "That's because this is a mission, I'm expected to be professional."

"Then why are you having this little conversation?" Bella asked, with just the slightest hint of playfulness creeping onto her face.

Rui shrugged.

He had chatted with her to lift her mood up slightly, but he didn't want to say that out loud. But Bella had noticed regardless.

"Thanks, I appreciate it." She rested her chin on his shoulder. "The past few days have been rough."

"No worries." Rui replied briefly.

The remaining journey was silent for the most part. Rui traversed through obscure routes and paths through district fourteen, a few hours later they had finally reached district twenty-three.

"Huff... huff... huff..." Rui panted.

Even with his stamina, he was tired. After considering his situation, he decided to take one of the rejuvenation potions he had at hand.

"I thought you were planning on saving those." Bella noted.

"At this rate, the mission won't last three days." Rui stated. "I think if you had a more nuanced understanding of what Martial Apprentices were capable of, you would have reduced the timeframe of the mission while increasing the difficulty so that you could obtain higher-grade Martial Apprentices, but hey you lucked out."

"How so?" Bella wondered.

"My evaluation from the Martial Academy was well above the difficulty grade assigned to the mission, you see."

"Oh?" Bella glanced at him curiously. "Then why did you accept the mission?"

"It's my first mission, so I planned to take it slow." Rui shrugged, before pointedly staring at her. "But thanks to a certain someone underselling the difficulty of the mission, that plan is not happening."

"Well, I didn't lie." Bella shrugged, smirking.

Rui snorted. "The Martial Union penalizes gross under-reporting, that's specified in the contract."

"Yes but they can't prove I underreported."

"You think that matters?" Rui laughed. "Your intent doesn't matter, as long as they evaluate you to bear responsibility for the under-reporting, you'll be penalized. If the Martial Union allowed people to get away with stuff like this, then everybody would severely undersell the difficulty of all missions, each mission would be much more difficult than evaluated and the Martial Union would be getting scammed left and right."

"True." Bella sighed. "But once I consolidate my position in the Hier Industries, I'll be able to pay off any monetary penalty they impose."

"That must have been part of your plan." Rui chuckled.

"It was." She admitted. "As long as I can gain full control of all the power and wealth my father has passed down to me, I can fix everything."

"I can pay for what I did and also..." Bella's voice submerged into rage. "I can make those who caused all of this to pay for what they did!"