

Martial Unity 101

Chapter 101: Wern

Fifteen minutes later, Rui and Bella had navigated through district twenty-three, and found themselves in front of commercial building.

"Is this it?" Rui asked. They'd finally reached the local transport company that Bella had spoken about. Bella apparently trusted the director enough to seek help from him despite her vulnerable situation. Rui was quite hopeful about this, if this man was actually reliable as Bella alluded, then Bella had a pretty good chance of achieving her objective.

Bella nodded. "Let's go."

She had not only covered her hair, but also obscured her face under a cap-like garment to ensure no one could possibly identify her features enough to recognize them if inquired by the Lowminers.

The interior of the reception was hospitable enough, there were seating arrangements on one side of the room, with an array of receptionists engaging with each visitor one-by-one. A little behind them was a several corridors that led to the interior of the building.

"How do you plan to meet the director?" Rui asked. "You'll need to reveal your identity in order to get an immediate appointment with him, that's risky."

"I just need him to see me once." Bella replied confidently. "He'll understand once he sees me. Help me force my way to his office."

Rui nodded.

They walked towards one particular corridor that Bella was aiming for, hoping they would be able to naturally pass.

"Excuse me, please take your seat in the visitor's bay, I'm afraid we cannot allow you enter the building without permission and authorization." A receptionist noticed and insisted.

Bella began running, as Rui followed her example.

"Hey!" A guard blocked their path, attempting to grab Bella.

Thwack

A simple jab to the nose from Rui crumpled the man to his knees, leaving him in tears. Rui didn't even bother using his full raw physical strength, let alone using Vital Pressure, that would be overkill and Rui might accidentally kill him.

Bella hopped over him as she headed straight to the director's office.

"Uncle Wern!" Bella cried as she opened the door to the doctor's office.

The man inside squinted his small eyes through his rimmed spectacles as he tilted his head, before recognizing her as his eyes adjusted. "Bella?"

"Uncle Wern." Bella repeated, elated. "It's been so long."

"Sir! I'm sorry for the interruption." the receptionist apologized. "We tried to stop them bu-"

"Enough, good job." Wern interrupted her. "These people are my guests, please leave us."

The receptionist was visibly confused, but she nodded before closing the door and returning to her job.

"Bella." Wern was visibly overwhelmed. "Where have you been?? You weren't even present at your father's funeral!"

Hearing that, Rui realized Wern was probably not aware of the truth behind her father's death. If anything, in hindsight, Bella took a well-educated guess more than she made a deduction. However, she was paranoid enough to act on it, which was the reason she was alive at the moment.

Bella sighed. "I have a lot to tell you, this will take a while."

Wern raised his hand. "Then let me clear my schedule and finish a quick errand, so that I can listen to your story uninterrupted."

Bella nodded, as he walked out of the room. She sighed as she sunk into the comfortable sofas, feeling a sense of safety she hadn't experienced in the past few days. Rui observed her demeanor, she seemed like she really trusted this person.

Seeing her relief reminded him that she was just a seventeen-year-old girl, even if quite remarkable. Rui thought back to the teenage girls from back on Earth. Which one of them would have survived if they were in her shoes?

('Pretty much none of them.') Rui shook his head. ('The kids from back on Earth in the twenty-first century lead relatively simple teenage lives without too much responsibility and expectations.')

Bella had been groomed for inheriting the company from a young age, her acumen was remarkably well ahead of most of her peers.

Still, she was pretty much just a kid mentally from his perspective. He would even console her and comfort her a bit if not for the fact that it would be extremely patronizing for a fourteen-year-old to do that to a seventeen-year-old. Especially when teenage girls tended to mature faster than teenage boys initially.

Just then, Wern returned, interrupting his thoughts.

"Alright, now you can tell me everything that happened without interruption." Wern said, eyeing her with concern. "What happened? Why did you leave your home and disappear without a word?"

Bella sighed. "I left because my life is in danger."

Wern frowned. "What do you mean?"

"The Lowminers killed my father, uncle Wern." Bella solemnly stated.

His eyes flew wide open. "What?!"

"Initially, it was just a strong suspicion. The Lowminers wouldn't be able to take over the company unless they coerced father into selling them the remaining shares or rescinding them. However, father would rather die than do that, and they know this. At that rate, the conflict would take decades to end and the Lowminers would probably never get complete dominance and monopoly."

Wern's eyes sharpened, catching onto her drift. "Unless... Karl were to die." He said, referring to her father by his name.

"The laws of ownership are formulated as such, they would gain complete control of Hier Industries." She said.

Wern nodded "But since that didn't happen and you are the owner of the dominant majority of shares, that must have been what Karl's will was about."

Bella nodded. "Father must have prepared it as a contingency after the Lowminers acquired a portion of Hier Industries, to not allow them to win even if they managed to kill him."

"I see..." Wern's eyes wandered across the floor as he processed her words. "But this isn't proof, Bella."

"No, but my personal estate being raided by known affiliate gangs of the Lowminer Industries is." She firmly asserted. "They have tried to kill me twice in my journey here. I wouldn't have survived if it wasn't for the Martial Apprentice bodyguard I hired." She said, gesturing to Rui.

"He saved my life."

Chapter 102: Route

Wern glanced at Rui, sizing him up overtly. "A Martial Apprentice from the Martial Union, eh? You're quite young for a Martial Apprentice."

Rui didn't respond, there was nothing he had to say to those words. Furthermore, although he grown a little chummy with Bella, he still wanted to maintain bodyguard etiquette. Bodyguards didn't talk unless absolutely necessary. This conversation was purely one between Bella and Wern, his job was to protect Bella no matter what.

Wern eventually turned back to Bella with sorrowful eyes. "I'm sorry for everything you've been through Bella, it must have been hard."

Bella shook her head. "You have nothing apologize for, uncle Wern."

Wern sighed. "So, what can I help you with Bella? I assume you didn't come here to just catch up?"

"I need to get to Laxus." Bella explained.

Wern understood her intentions. "You want to consolidate your position in a town where the Lowminers have no influence eh? Makes sense."

Bella nodded.

"But are you sure about this, Bella?" Wern asked. "Sure about fighting back?" He completed.

"Of course!" Bella retorted, bristled. "They killed my father!"

Wern sighed. "Yes, but what you're attempting to do isn't going to be easy. In fact, you're going to be risking your life. Even if you take the ultimate precaution and arm yourself with Martial Apprentice bodyguards for the rest of your life, you'll have to live with immense burden."

"I am completely prepared for this." Bella retorted sternly. "I have long made up my mind."

Wern sighed as Rui silently gauged the conversation. The latter could definitely see where Wern was coming from. Bella may have been educated for this all her life, but Rui was highly skeptical of how fit she was to lead and manage the Hier Industries.

Ultimately, she was merely seventeen-year-old girl. The objectives she aimed to complete even if she survived this predicament weren't tasks that could be accomplished without experience.

Rui was relatively sure that she wasn't ready yet. He could sense that Wern felt the same way.

Wern sighed. "Alright, if that's what you want, then so be it. You are already an adult. You have the right to take charge of your life and live how you want to life. I just hope you understand what you're getting yourself into."

Bella shook her head. "Thank you for your concern uncle. But I'm well aware of the gravity of my choices."

Wern sighed once more. "Alright, if that's the case, I have nothing more to say on that matter."

"Coming back to the matter of travelling to Laxus..." Bella reminded.

"Yes, I can arrange it for you. There are different routes, however, not all of them are safe, since they pertain supplies of goods and resources relevant to the business affairs of the Lowminers." Wern explained.

Bella nodded, deep in thought.

Even if the Lowminers didn't operate in the town of Laxus, didn't mean Bella could merrily hop onto a carriage in any trade or supply route between the towns of Laxus and Hajin.

Both the Lowminer and Hier Industries were suppliers, they acquired exotic resources from elsewhere and sold them to the esoteric technology sector that would process the supplies and manufacture technological products that would then be sold to the private and corporate markets of the town.

Meaning both Lowminers and Hier Industries had to import massive supplies from outside Hajin into it. Although they each had their own transit capacities, it was extremely difficult to cover all their shipping needs of their own capabilities.

Thus, both industries partially relied on smaller transportation and shipping companies that offered transit services, that took care of the remaining shipping needs.

The Wern Company was one such company. Wern and Karl Hier had initially met when Karl when Hier Industries had first initially taken off in Hajin, they had hit it off immediately on a favourable shipping contract and had grown closer and closer over the years as their companies grew.

Bella had to avoid routes between Hajin and Laxus that would put her closer to Lowminer influence. If she chose to get into a carriage on a route that the Lowminers frequently used to transport supplies, then she might get caught.

On the other hand, if the Lowminers were aware of her intentions to get to Laxus, then they might predict what routes she chooses and intercept her.

As for whether the aware, Rui was relatively certain they had gauged her general intentions. It was a simple and relatively common-sense plan from Bella, and it didn't take a genius to figure out what she was doing and why.

Which is why the details of Bella's plan became more and more important. Rui glanced at Wern and Bella. They had already taken out a map encompassing Hajin and Laxus, and had begun having an intense discussion, pointing to different lines of different colours that ran between Hajin and Laxus. Rui hoped they would make the best choice; the success or failure of the mission was on the line.

There was a good chance the next time the Lowminers caught them, Rui wouldn't be able to handle them as easily. The Lowminers must have already long been informed about the Martial Apprentice bodyguard that Bella managed to commission from the Martial Union.

This meant the next time there was a confrontation, they would be much more prepared, the end goal was to capture or kill Bella, meaning they didn't necessarily have to kill Bella. Ideally, they would want to kill Bella without killing Rui, in order to avoid poking the Martial Union. Meaning they would engage Bella and Rui in a manner solely meant to kill Bella. This would make Rui's job much harder. It was much harder to protect and evacuate someone else, than just himself.

"The Vorefire Horn supply routes are the shortest." Bella said. "Furthermore, path hits Laxus closest to the closest Hier branch."

Wern shook his head. "The Lowminers have begun expanding into the Vorefire Horn market in the past few months, it's no longer safe. Furthermore, the route ends too closely to other supply routes that the Lowminers use regularly. It's too risky."

They had yet to come to a decision.

Chapter 103: Not Going Anywhere

After half an hour of back-and-forth, Bella and Wern finally decided on the best course of action. They had taken into account Lowminer presence, proximity to other Lowminer suppliers, travel timeframe and distance.

"Cardinal Steel supply route it is then." Wern sat back, sighing tiredly.

Bella nodded. "This is definitely the best choice all things considered. How soon we can leave?"

Wern considered her question for a second. "The next supply dispatch is in an hour so."

"That's perfect!" Bella's eyes lit up.

"I suggest waiting for a bit." Rui interjected. "You can hire a few more Martial Apprentice bodyguards to protect you during the journey." The mission range limit prevented him from joining her anyway, so Rui didn't have to worry about sharing credit, he would get paid his share regardless.

Bella nodded. "That's a good idea." She turned to Wern. "Can you help me with the mission funds Uncle? I'll repay you after I consolidate my position."

Wern smiled warmly. "Don't worry about it. You'll be travelling by yourself after all. I wouldn't want to repeat you getting almost caught by Lowminer gangs without a bodyguard in a dingy little inn like last time. I care for you too much." He said affectionately.

Bella laughed as she dove to hug Wern. "I love you so much uncle! Thank you."

"Oh careful! I'm an old man you know." Earning more laughter from Bella.

Rui couldn't help but smile at the warm scene.

Yet, suddenly, he felt an ominous chill.

('Wait a minute.') His face froze as he shuddered as though he'd seen a ghost.

"Hm." Bella noticed. "What's wrong?"

Rui's face grew pale as he turned to Wern, sizing him up.

"What's wrong, young man?" Wern asked with sharp eyes.

"How do you know...?" Rui gulped before continuing. "How do you know Bella was almost caught by the Lowminer gang in an inn before she met me?"

"Hm? Oh that." Wern replied a little too quickly. "Bella mentioned that at the start."

"Not she did not." Rui firmly denied. "She only mentioned the number of times we'd been attacked. She did not mention any other details."

Bella had already caught on to Rui's drift. She turned towards Wern, with horror and terror in her eyes.

"Calm down." Wern raised his hands. "News of the fifteen men beat up by a Martial Artist has spread."

Rui glared at him. "That doesn't explain how you knew they were Lowminer gangs, and that they were after Bella."

Wern glared back, his façade crumbling by the second, before facing her. "Bella! He doesn't know what he's talking about. I've known you since you were an infant."

SLAP

A thundering slap resounded through the room as Bella swung with everything. Tears streamed down Bella's pained face. "Why?"

Wern had toppled over from the force. "Why? WHY?" He laughed contemptuously. "Because this company is EVERYTHING to me. You think I'm going to sacrifice my life's work for the daughter of the man who caused all this mess?" He spat. "I TOLD Karl to not mess with Lowminers. That he'd die for it. Did he listen to me? NO. Now look at the mess he got me in!"

Rui's face scrunched in confusion. "Mess?"

"He means the Lowminers." Bella whispered softly.

"The Wern Company has always associated with Hier Industries. When Karl died, I thought it was too late for me. But they offered me a sweet deal."

Rui understood. "To cooperate with them for the capture of Bella."

"Among other things."

As a company that had large amount of control over supply routes and chains all over Hajin and between Hajin and Laxus, Wern was in a position that was of great utility to the Lowminers. Even if the Lowminers didn't predict that Bella trusted Wern enough to directly and straightforwardly to him, Wern was still quite useful to them.

"Do they know we're here?" Rui asked urgently.

"..."

"I said..." Rui grabbed him and used Vital Pressure to inflict excruciating pain.

"AAAAAAGHH"

"...Do they know we're here?"

"I sent them a message when you arrived via a communication device they gave me, they told me to stall for a bit over half an hour" Wern grinned despite the pain. "That was half an hour ago."

Rui's eyes flew wide open. He knocked Wern out with a well-placed chop to the neck. "Fuck!" Rui cursed. He grabbed Bella. "We need to go! NOW."

He lifted her and sprinted out the office, running at top speed.

"What should we do now! Why haven't they done anything to us yet if they knew we were here all this time?"

"Because sending ordinary men after you will likely lead to failure because of me." Rui deduced. "If they send a bunch of untrained gang grunts after you, chances are we'll escape, all they will have done is alert us and given us a chance to escape and lose track of us yet again. Sending ordinary people is mostly pointless, the reason they haven't launched an attack yet is because..." Rui gritted his teeth.

"Because?"

"Because they're sending a Martial Artist. That's the only explanation that makes sense." Rui explained with a pained face. "The Martial Artist must have been a district away if Wern was told to stall us for only half an hour. He or she is already in this town somewhere."

Rui grimaced as he ran away at top speed. He needed to put as much distance as he possibly could between their previous location and them. He took obscure roots and stayed away from crowds where they would draw attention for their speed.

"The best thing we need to do now is to hide until-!"

WHOOSH

Rui ducked sharply, protectively covering Bella from any harm as they skidded away. He had, almost instinctively, sensed and avoided something coming at them with tremendous force through only the sound of the attack furiously cutting through air.

He got up just in time to throw up a guard to yet another incoming attack.

THWACK

Rui grimaced as he muffed the impact with Acute Edge and Elastic Shift. However, he didn't stop there. He immediately moved with the strike as he grasped his opponent's arm with all four limbs, aiming to use Binding Lash to dislocate or even break his opponent's arm.

But alas, to no avail. The most dangerous part of Binding Lash was well-avoided as his opponent cleanly maneuvered to counter it. However, Rui still managed to drag their attacker to the ground, forcing the battle to enter ground-grappling.

Rui didn't even turn to Bella, his face pale with effort. "GO. RUN. NOW."

Bella got up and ran away without hesitation as Rui turned to look his opponent in the eye.

"You're not going anywhere." He declared.

Chapter 104: Woe

Rui finally got a good look at his aggressor. Not that it helped much because his aggressor was masked. However, there were things that could still be gauged despite this.

('Adult male. His bulky physique probably means he's not a speed or maneuvering oriented Martial Artist, he's definitely a Martial Apprentice though') Rui thought as he struggled to restrain him.

Rui's goal in this fight was not to win. He had two goals:

The first was to survive. His survival was the ultimate priority to him. Although he had gotten closer to Bella during the mission, he was not going sacrifice his life for her. Rui never fancied himself to be a hero or a saint.

The second, was to stall, not win. He did not intend to expend any extra energy on killing his opponent or knocking him out, though if he could, that would be great too. But for the most part, Rui was going to do his best to stall for Bella.

Stalling was easier than defeating, in most cases. Thankfully, this was one of those cases.

This was also how Rui planned to compensate for the weight difference. Rui had grown remarkably physically stronger over the last year, much more so than almost anybody else. However, at the end of the day he was still only a fourteen-year-old.

His opponent seemed to be in his twenties, the prime of his life. An adult Martial Apprentice was stronger than an adolescent Martial Apprentice. Rui had to capitalize on his advantages as much as he could, stalling instead of aiming for a win, was part of the plan.

FOOSH

The masked Martial Apprentice finally managed to untangle himself from Rui's ground grappling.

POW POW POW

Rui immediately began showering him with a barrage of strikes of Vital Pressure, but his opponent managed to block and redirect almost all of them.

WHOOSH

Rui managed to cleanly crouch out of a high kick while simultaneously sweeping his pivot leg with a low kick.

BAM

It landed, but the difference in power prevented Rui from knocking him out of balance. His opponent returned the favour by launching a barrage of blows.

BAM BAM BAM

Rui was pushed back despite mitigating the force with Acute Edge and Elastic Shift, he leapt back putting some distance between them. They both paused for merely half a second, regaining their bearings. However, Martial Apprentices processed combat so quickly that even half a second in combat was akin half a dozen seconds. In fact, not even half a minute had passed since the Martial Apprentice ambushed Rui!

('His Martial Art leans towards power and toughness.') Rui analyzed, while parsing the data he had collected through the basics of the VOID algorithm. ('The first step is to adapt my fighting approach such that the relevance and significance of power and durability is as minimal as possible.')

"Fuuuu..." Rui exhaled as he relaxed his muscles, shaking and dangling them, while crouching his knees relaxedly. Despite this, Rui dashed towards the masked Martial Apprentice aggressively, much to the latter's surprise.

WHOOSH

Rui abruptly stopped and stepped back avoiding a counter haymaker from his opponent before circling around and entering his striking range to land a quick jab.

Pow

WHOOSH

Rui jumped out of range after avoiding a low kick. The masked Martial Apprentice grimaced in frustration at the abrupt change in fighting styles, Rui had gone from passive defense to maneuvering and evasive offense, becoming a much more annoying opponent!

('Float like a butterfly...')

WHOOSH

Rui danced out of a straight punch.

('... Sting like a bee!')

POW

A clean jab to the solar plexus.

This strategy was not exactly pioneering. It was the strategy that the legendary Muhammad Ali once said he would use if he had to fight Mike Tyson. This strategy was similar to what Kane used against Fae. A

light offense combined with evasive maneuvering to avoid his opponent's counter. Land in jabs wherever you could, avoid all attacks through evasive maneuvering.

But, there was one key difference. Kane accomplished this through speed and agility, something Rui didn't have.

Rui compensated for his lacking speed and agility with the predictive and counter-deduction measures of the VOID algorithm.

Range and balance of weight. Using this, Rui was able to deduce the general attack that his opponent was aiming for, and the VOID algorithm simply outputted a corresponding move that has the greatest chance for success. Rui himself had painstakingly worked on the counter-deduction system of the VOID algorithm that constructed through a mind-numbing amount of data science.

Watching his work allow him to gain an upper hand, even if small, in a disadvantaged battle validated Rui to his very core. The Martial Scientist in him was excited!

BAM

Rui almost flew away as his opponent landed a solid strike on him. He got up quickly and propped up his stinging arms into a stance, prepared for the next move.

('Come!') Rui urged. He sharpened his senses awaiting a bullrush, yet a guttural screech from a distance away broke him out of his reverie. He just barely managed to recognize the voice.

('Bella!') In a moment of shock, he glanced towards the direction the scream for just a second.

However, when he turned back...

('He's gone!') Rui cursed. The Martial Apprentice had escaped from the edge of Rui's vision, and scurried away into background.

('He went away in the opposite direction.') Rui frowned, incredibly confused as he began moving in the direction from where he heard Bella. ('Does he not care if I run after her?')

The only reason he would do that is if his job was cancelled.

('Or if his job is complete.') Rui froze in horror. He immediately strained himself to the absolute maximum, running at a speed that physically hurt his body.

He sprinted faster than he ever had before, moving at a speed that ordinary people would find difficult to even follow with their eyes!

('No no no. There's no way.') He tried to calm himself down. ('First I need fucking fin-')

His thoughts suddenly froze as something entered his vision.

What he saw next wiped every ounce of energy and tension in his muscles.

He just froze without a care, tripping and crashing on the ground hard before looking up.

And there she was.

What he saw was a sight that burned itself into his memory, forever.

Tears streaming down her face, snot trickling down her nose, eyes rolled almost entirely up, and a pool of blood splurting from her slit neck.

Face-to-face with the corpse of Bella Hier.

Chapter 105: Aftermath

Despair.

Rage.

Shock.

Guilt.

And even grief.

A maelstrom of emotions swirled within Rui. Emotions he did not understand. He had only known her for a meagre twenty-four hours. They were just barely friends as they had grown a little closer over the duration of their mission. There was a good chance Rui would never even see her again even if the mission succeeded.

So why?

Why did he feel like his soul was being torn apart as he gazed at her corpse?

Because she was his responsibility? Because he had ended up becoming emotionally invested in her well-being and success?

Probably both.

An eternity passed before Rui broke out of his reverie. He pulled out the communication device handed to him by the Martial Union, hitting one of the numerous buttons, the one he was supposed to hit when the mission ended. He hit in a few additional details, indicating the presence of a corpse. The device would convey his location to the Martial Union, and they would send post-mission personnel to take over.

Murder was still a crime in the Kandrian Empire. The Martial Union would cooperate with law-enforcement and begin the judicial process immediately. He would be required to provide testimony and statements on the matter eventually.

A hint of determination glinted in his eyes. The Lowminers and that man Wern. Rui was not going to conceal any of the information he possessed. He hoped justice would be served.

He had the strong desire to serve it himself. At this very moment he could easily sprint back and kill Wern in an instant.

"Fuuuu..." He exhaled, restraining himself.

STEP

Rui turned as he heard the arrival of a group of people in uniforms with the emblem of the Martial Union.

"Apprentice Rui Quarrier?" A man at the head of the team inquired, noting Rui's Apprentice uniform. "I'm inspector Gale." He said, showing Rui a badge. "I'm here to take proceed with the post-mission protocols. I encourage you to do the same by returning to the Martial Academy to provide a report and statement."

Rui nodded listlessly, taking one last look at Bella's corpse even as the sight of it scorched his lifeless eyes.

He sighed shakily before turning his back on it.

The journey back to the Academy was a few hours in its totality. Giving Rui enough time to introspect, and sort out his thoughts and emotions.

Why did he fail? How much responsibility did he bear? And most importantly, how was he supposed to deal with his emotions?

The last part was the hardest. Rui wasn't even sure he had an answer, or if he would ever find one.

The first two were much more objective, allowing him to analyze them more fairly.

The reason the mission failed was because they had fallen into their enemy's trap. They were screwed the moment Wern informed the Lowminers of their location. This was the reason Bella died.

In hindsight, Rui realized the Lowminers must have mobilized pretty much all available manpower at hand even before the masked Martial Apprentice ambushed Rui and Bella. This made sense.

The masked Martial Apprentice was meant to drag Rui away from Bella and keep him there while the gangs mobilized by Bella must have killed her after, when she was defenseless and vulnerable.

She must have screamed and struggled in despair as the men held her down and cut open her throat like livestock.

Just the very thought of that sent blood to his head, until he closed his eyes and crushed the feeling, trying to think rationally.

If Rui had been able to avoid the Martial Apprentice, they would have survived. Rui would have easily disemboweled the grunts with ease.

In the end, Rui felt like a fool. He had thought that he was the one stalling and restraining the Martial Apprentice. But in the end, it turned out to be the exact opposite. The Martial Apprentice turned out to be stalling him!

He had so many regrets. If he had been more careful, he would have kept Bella hidden and interacted with Wern on her behalf. That would have been a cautious tale that at the very least would have spared Bella from her fate.

But instead, he offloaded all the responsibility of the decision-making to her, freeing himself of the burden.

As a Martial Artist, this wasn't exactly wrong. He had a mission to complete and he had very little incentive or duty to undertake any more responsibility outside of the commission that Bella commissioned to the Martial Union. Bodyguards were supposed to protect no matter what their target of protection did, or where they went, they were not supposed to undertake responsibility of the decision-making capacity of their adult as long as their target of protection was mentally well and an adult. In this regard, Rui was perfectly fine.

However, bodyguards were supposed to protect.

If Rui had been strong enough, he would have been able to defeat their opponent Martial Apprentice quickly before proceeding to Bella's side to protect her.

This was a bit unreasonable from an objective point of view. Defeating an older Martial Apprentice with a huge physique advantage, that too in a short amount of time was rather unreasonable to demand of any Martial Artist. Furthermore, this was his very first mission that was much harder than the Academy evaluation of the mission

All things considered, there were plenty of reasons that one might evaluate Rui to be free of moral responsibility despite his failure to successfully complete the mission.

But the question was whether Rui was able to forgive himself. Despite the fact that he was cognizant enough to be able to look at the situation from an objective point of view, the memory of Bella's corpse that was deeply etched in his mind reared its head into the equation, and sent Rui's tumultuous emotions into a tumble again.

The logic simple didn't matter anymore.

How could he possibly forgive himself knowing that his insufficiency allowed her to suffer that fate?

Chapter 106: Apology

Rui's dilemma hadn't been resolved even as he reached the Academy, but at the very least he was finally able to put his thoughts aside for a valid reason as he underwent the post-mission protocol.

He headed straight to the commission department of the Academy, plucked out one of the forms that Martial Artists were required to fill. These involved filling mundane details about himself and the mission. Followed by a detailed report of the proceedings of the mission, in a chronological manner, with time stamps.

Filling out the report was painful and strangely therapeutic. It was painful revisiting everything, especially with twenty-twenty hindsight. Everything he recounted now felt flawed and mistake-riddled and blunder-filled. He kept thinking of how he could have done better.

On the other hand, he was able to vent as he wrote down his experiences in detail. He felt as though a lot of the frustration, guilt and grief were ebbing out from his stressed heart, flowing out of his body and into the ink of his pen.

He felt a little calmer and more composed as the longer he wrote. His burden didn't grow any lighter, but he felt strong enough to carry it.

In that moment, he felt his determination will up.

('Never again.') He vowed. ('I'm going to grow strong enough to ensure that this something like this won't ever happen again.')

Once he completed the procedures he needed to, submitted the report.

"Mam." He addressed one of the support staff members of the commission department. "I'm here to receive the minimum guarantee pay of the mission."

Every mission gave the Martial Artist a bare minimum amount of remuneration, regardless of success or failure as long as the rules and protocol of the Martial Union weren't violated by the Martial Artist. Martial Artists staked their lives on the line with every mission, the minimum guarantee remuneration clause of the licensing agreement between the Martial Union and Martial Artist was instated to give Martial Artists some amount of leeway.

This was to ensure that they didn't have to starve just because they narrowly failed an extremely difficult mission, after spending an immense amount of time, effort and energy into the mission, undertaking great risks.

It was also way of ensuring that Martial Artist had less of a reason to be discontent with the Martial Union. After all, the Martial Union was nothing without Martial Artist that staked their lives every day.

"Just one second." She responded before flipping through some documents, before looking back up. "Your remuneration has been put on hold..."

Rui frowned. "Excuse me?"

"The issue has been taken up by the headmaster himself, I'm afraid." She shrugged helplessly. "I would suggest you visit him if you wish to inquire about it."

"...Okay." Rui turned around and headed towards the headmaster's office, confused.

Why would the headmaster meddle with his remuneration? Rui didn't understand at all. As he reached the headmaster's office, he paused, enraptured by the gate that restricted entry. He wasn't sure what to do. Wasn't there supposed to be secretaries or some other personnel that monitored who approached the office?

Should he knock?

('Screw it. Let's knock.')

It opened just as he reached it, allowing him full view of everything inside.

The office was gigantic, filled with a library of neatly arranged and organized documents and books.

However, what drew his attention was the figure sitting at the center of the office.

Headmaster Aronian; A mighty Martial Master!

"Headmaster." Rui bowed deeply, partly because of the great awe and respect he had for vaunted Martial Masters, partly because the sheer weight of headmaster Aronian's being pushing down on Rui, compelling him to bow.

Rui was once again reminded how deep the Martial Path extended, the fact that a human being could develop and grow his Martial Art until it became as mighty as a mountain, capable of crushing everything around it, lifted his spirits out of the muddle his emotions were.

"Enter." Headmaster Aronian spoke softly, yet Rui could hear nothing else, almost as if the world went silent when he opened his mouth.

Rui walked in immediately.

On the inside, there were two Martial Squires serving as guards. Under ordinary circumstances, Rui would have been awed by their formidable appearance and presence, but this time he hadn't even noticed them until they entered his field of vision!

The weight of the presence of Martial Squires were drowned out entirely by that of headmaster Aronian. Stars could only shine at night, when the sun wasn't around, otherwise they are invisible.

"Apprentice Rui Quarrier." He spoke with a casual tone despite the formality of his words. "I've been wanting to speak to you face-to-face for a while now. But only today has there been an apt enough opportunity."

"It's an honour, headmaster Aronian." He said respectfully.

Headmaster Aronian chuckled lightly, much to Rui's surprise. "No need to be too formal with me young man. I appreciate candour."

"I am being honest, headmaster. All of those words could not be truer." Rui replied earnestly.

Headmaster Aronian simply smiled. "Well, I suppose you're here to inquire about your remuneration, yes?"

"Yes, headmaster." Rui stated.

"Before I speak about that, I would first like to offer an apology."

Rui's eyebrows knitted in confusion. "An... apology?"

"We have learnt and verified several intel, even outside of your report, that proves that the mission's difficulty was heinously under-rated on our end." He said, before continuing. "In light of all the information at hand, this mission is at the very least a grade five as far as difficulty goes. However, it may even be raised depending on the results of further investigation from the post-mission intelligence investigation."

He paused with a hint of sorrow molding into his expression. "There is absolutely no justification on the Academy's end for a year-old Martial Apprentice accepting a grade five mission faultily evaluated to be a grade one mission. This isn't unheard of, or even particularly rare, but this extreme instance was truly an unacceptable lapse on our end."

He paused, before bowing his head lightly. "On behalf of the Academy, I am sorry."

Chapter 107: Compensation

Rui was taken aback. He did not expect the headmaster of the Academy to lower his head so easily. Martial Masters possessed a status that astronomically dwarfed that of any Martial Apprentice. Furthermore, he wasn't just any ordinary Martial Master, but the headmaster of the Martial Academy. For someone of his stature to lower his head to Rui was too much to take.

"Please raise your head headmaster." Rui quickly replied, raising his hands. "It isn't your fault."

"Even so." He raised his head. "I bear the responsibility as the headmaster of the Academy."

Rui remained silent at that. That line hit a little close he himself was feeling about the mission.

Except Bella was too dead for him to apologize to.

"One of the reasons I called you was to apologize and take responsibility. I've already gone through your report." He said, before continuing. "I sensed the deep regret and guilt you feel in your words. That is why I wanted to be absolutely clear. The mission's difficulty was extremely high, just another Martial Apprentice being involved alone put the mission's difficulty grade vastly above what you sought. The completion of this mission would require at least two Martial Apprentices, or an experienced high-grade Martial Apprentice. You do not bear any fault or blame, on any level."

Rui was cognizant enough to realize the logical soundness of the headmaster's words. From an outsider's perspective, he himself would not put any blame on an inexperienced child Martial Apprentice's failure in completing a mission that was faultily severely under-graded by the Academy.

But he wasn't an outsider, nor a child. Which is why Martial Master's words didn't truly resonate with him at his core.

"The Martial Union and the Martial Academy possesses a rigorous commission intelligence department." He said. "This department aims to verify the information that clients provide us in their commissions as well as gain as much information about the mission as possible. This collected information factors into the evaluation of the difficulty-grade of the commission."

He paused before turning to Rui. "However, it is not perfect, in some cases it is truly difficult to accurately evaluate the difficulty of the mission. In this case in particular, it was not possible with our current measures to have accurately evaluated the danger of the mission ahead of time. Ah, I'm not trying to dodge responsibility or justify the lapse in evaluation accuracy, I'm just providing you with greater context."

Rui nodded, mildly intrigued. "So... regarding the remuneration for the mission..."

"Ah, I almost forgot." Headmaster Aronian stated. "Normally, we wouldn't do this, but the failure of the mission is entirely the Martial Academy's responsibility. Not only is not your fault that the mission failed, but you have even performed much better than a Martial Apprentice of your grade would be expected

to. In light of all of this, I have taken the initiative to ensure the Academy remunerates you with not just the minimum guarantee pay, but the full mission-completion reward as well."

Rui's eyes widened in surprise, this was completely unexpected. To get the mission-completion reward anyway even though he hadn't even successfully completed the mission? Furthermore, getting that in addition to the minimum guarantee meant that he was actually getting more remuneration than the maximum for a mission he failed to complete.

"Consider it a token of our apology and admiration of your performance during the mission." Headmaster Aronian. "Furthermore, your Martial Art is unique and unheard-of, we would like to extend a hand in aiding your development of it, normally we do not give credits, and by extension, techniques for free. But you have truly earned them despite not successfully completing the mission."

Rui's eyes mildly lit up in elation. After his failure, his desire to develop and expand his Martial Art had also grown remarkable stronger. In addition to his inherent love for Martial Art and combat, the desire to obtain power had also germinated within him.

In this world, power was everything, it underlined everything within human civilization, and human civilization itself. Powerlessness meant suffering.

Although his desire for power did not surpass his love for his Martial Art and Martial path, he had now become even more cognizant of its value. He had grown just a little content with the remarkable power he had obtained after forming the foundation of his Martial Art, especially after his performance against Squire Kyrie. He had thought he was doing pretty well for his age, and he merrily immersed himself in his boundless love for the purer aspects of Martial Art and combat. But now he had also developed a desire to obtain power for the sake of power.

His desire to obtain the priced techniques had grown even stronger.

"With the total amount you will receive from the Martial Academy as remuneration, you can't purchase any decent technique." Headmaster Aronian commented. "I would suggest stocking up some more. I hope you choose well. I am quite interested in how your Martial Art will shape up to be, and what direction your Martial Path will lead you."

Rui nodded. "Thank you, headmaster. I am truly grateful to you and the Academy for the compensation, as well as your kind words. I will do my best to live up to your expectations."

Headmaster Aronian nodded. "You do that, young man. Now then, I suppose that brings this meeting to an end. I look forward to your endeavors, as well as our next meeting."

"Thank you, headmaster." Rui bowed, before turning to exit the office.

He heaved a sigh of relief once he left the room and put some distance between them. Headmaster Aronian was truly kind to him, however the sheer passive pressure that Martial Master exerted on all sentient life was not to be underestimated. Rui felt like he had taken off some heavy training weights after a long day of physical exercise.

('What to do now?') Rui wondered. As much as he wanted to dive right into the Apprentice Library, he felt the need to check up on his friends, he hadn't seen them since they all parted ways for the Winter holidays.

Chapter 108: Slam Dunk

"You look rough." Kane noted.

"I've had a rough a day." Rui replied. "My mission was hard, and I failed."

Kane glanced back at Rui. "Oof, that must be rough. But hey, it happens to everyone. Chin up." He put an arm around Rui's shoulder. "What mission did you choose?"

"Bodyguard." Rui replied with a single word.

Kane's eyes widened as he realized why Rui had been looking so down, and why the failure had hit him so hard. "...Damn."

"Yeah, it was rough." Rui sighed. "I had chosen a bodyguard mission of grade one, looking to take things slow with an easy mission to break the ice. Turns out the mission was actually a grade five mission, at the very least." Rui paused.

Kane jerked his head back in shock. "Grade five?? Those are only for missions that are able to threaten the lives of Martial Apprentices. You and I shouldn't even be allowed to take missions of that grade."

"Yeah, the mission's difficulty was severely underestimated by the Martial Academy, apparently." Rui sighed helplessly. "My target of protection was being hunted down by a huge local behemoth of an esoteric supplier, we were being pursued by gangs and even a Martial Apprentice."

"That's actually insane, what the fuck?" Kane was entirely in disbelief. "I'm impressed you survived."

"I only managed because their prime target wasn't me, they managed to hold me back with a Martial Apprentice who pulled me away from my target, and my target was killed after she was operated from me."

"That's messed up."

"Yeah."

They both sat around in silence, before Rui broke it with a question.

"What mission did you undertake?" Rui asked. "You were gone for four days."

"I took a hunting mission." Kane shrugged. "Had to hunt some highly elusive species of deer."

"Deer?"

"Yeah, the mission had a high pre-requisite as far as maneuvering techniques went. So I chose the mission because it was right up my alley."

"What grade mission was it?" Rui asked out of curiosity.

"Only a grade two. Requires a lot of time and sustained effort, but of no threat to life." Kane replied.
"The perfect mission to ensure I didn't have to go home, you see. That alone was worth the mission, even if there was no remuneration."

Rui chuckled mirthfully at Kane's words. Talking with Kane really did put him to ease.

"So you're planning to do more missions right?" Kane asked. "Since you must not have gotten any significant amount of Martial Credits from this mission."

"No, I did."

"Eh?" Kane tilted his head.

"The headmaster told me that the Martial Academy took full responsibility for the failure of the mission, and would be remunerating me with the mission-success reward in addition to the minimum guarantee payroll as a token of apology."

"That's actually awesome. How many Martial Credits is that in total?" Kane inquired.

"A total of fifty-seven Martial Credits."

"Hmmm. That's not bad, you should be able to purchase a somewhat not-bad technique with that."
Kane politely offered.

"And I wanted to set out to grow stronger immediately too." Rui sighed.

"I'd suggest not doing that." Kane told Rui. "I'd suggest amassing some more credits as well as mission experience before jumping into a training period."

"Hmmm..." Rui pondered. Perhaps his desire to develop his Martial Art as well as to grow stronger had made him a tad too impatient. He had really only been a Martial Apprentice for less than half a year, and had joined the Academy only a year ago.

If he put aside his emotions for a second, he was sure his growth trajectory was extremely optimistic. What he needed was a well-founded, stable growth. Rashly picking some technique with a constrained budget was not the best choice at hand.

Kane said that fifty-seven Martial Credits were enough to get a 'somewhat not-bad' technique with that, which was a polite of way of saying a bad technique.

Although paid techniques were above foundational free techniques, that didn't mean they were good. In fact, Rui was largely as strong as he was not because his techniques were super powerful, but because he used them much better than Martial Apprentices of his age and growth level. A large portion of his strength came from the predictive and counter-deductive systems of the VOID algorithm and the resourceful tactics he applied in combat.

What Rui needed not was to comprehensively build upon the foundation of his Martial Art in a less constrained way. This meant accumulating enough martial credits to be able to buy higher grade techniques that were suited to his Martial Art.

Maybe even spend the next month or two just grinding and speed-running low-grade missions to gather Martial Credits easily and without much pressure and risk.

"You're right." Rui muttered. "I do like immersing myself in training with a lot of techniques. I don't want to jump back and forth between training and missions too frequently either, those abrupt changes in mindsets are annoying."

Kane nodded. "Also, you do learn techniques way faster than the others, so if you train yourself to learn one technique, you would be out too quick."

Rui nodded.

"Also." Kane added. "You should experience some successes before you close yourself in your little Martial mancave for training."

"Experience some successes?" Rui asked.

"Yeah. Like just the satisfaction of completing a tiring mission is good. I don't think you should go right into training after a devastating failure, you'll just end up being depressed or cynical." Kane shrugged. "But that's what I think."

He brought up a good point, Rui realized. His mental state was far, far from healthy. This was to be expected since it hadn't even been half a day since Bella died. But he realized that Kane was wise to suggest avoiding holing himself up in this mental state.

Rui had simply not thought of this because he used to hole himself up practically his entire life in his last life, mostly because of his asthma.

"You're right." Rui smiled. "I should go slam dunk some missions."

"What's a slam dunk?"

"Er, nothing."

Chapter 109: No Matter What

"Hey guys." A voice called out to them. "It has been a while. How's it going?"

Kane grumbled while Rui smiled. "Hey Fae, Milliana."

Milliana nodded, while Fae vigorously waved her hand, the latter had truly begun to be more expressive of her emotions during her time in the Academy.

"How was your first mission Rui?" Fae asked.

"Terrible, I failed to complete it." Rui shook his head, straightforwardly answering.

"My." Fae frowned. "Don't worry, you'll get it next time." She patted his shoulder, before continuing. "Speaking of which, I actually have an interesting proposal for all of you."

"Hm?" Rui looked at her curiously while Kane looked at her with skepticism.

"A grade six defense-class party mission with a five-member pre-requisite." Fae explained. "It's a mission to protect a travelling batch of supply caravans through a shady region known for being an ambush location for a bandit group. Our job is to protect the dispatched batch of supply carriages from potential bandit groups."

"Hmmm..." Rui was intrigued by the matter. "A grade six mission is going to be risky, since grade five and above can threaten the life of a Martial Apprentice, right?"

"A single Martial Apprentice, yes. A mission of a certain grade can either be taken on by a Martial Apprentice of an equal grade or even higher. Or multiple Martial Apprentices of a low grade." Fae reminded.

Rui nodded, recalling that fact. "So that's why you want to form a party. We fall into the latter category."

Fae nodded. "Kane, Milliana, Dalen and I are grade four. What grade are you Rui?"

"Three." He sighed.

"Don't look so down, I started out with grade three too." Fae revealed. "Milliana here started with grade two." Earning a blank nod from Milliana.

"Why do you want to go out of your way to get this mission?" Kane eyed her suspiciously.

"Ah, that's because it has a really sweet bonus reward." Fae chuckled.

Customers had the option to incentivize their commissions above the standard exchange rate if they wanted to, to make their commissions more alluring to Martial Artists of higher grades, since the Martial Union usually deferred a commission that was being contested over by two different Martial Artists to the higher-grade Martial Artist.

"What does the total amount to, per person?" Rui asked curiously.

"Hehe, a total of 500 Martial Credits!" Fae declared.

Rui's eyes sparkled with a hint of greed. That was almost ten times what he received from his first bodyguard mission.

"I'm in." Rui immediately said.

"No takebacks, ok?" Fae pressed. "You're definitely going to commit to this right?"

"Sure thing."

"Are you absolutely sure?" Fae pressed.

"It's a promise." Rui nodded. "Who's the client?"

"The Lowminer Industries." Fae answered simply. "Isn't that great?"

Rui stared at her with a frozen face. "...I'd like to take that promise back."

"Too late, you already committed."

"..."

"What's the big deal? You get a ton of cash."

Rui sighed, shaking his head

"Has Dalen already confirmed?" Kane asked suspiciously.

"Of course he has." Fae said with an inscrutable expression that didn't crack no matter how sharply Kane tried to peer past it.

"You planning on coming Kane?" Rui turned, asking him.

Kane sighed. "Fine, let's go. When does it start?"

"Next week." Fae replied. "So we still have some time."

"I can get to squeeze in some missions in between maybe." Rui murmured. "How many martial Credits do I get in order to purchase five high-grade techniques?"

"Hmmm... You should get around a thousand bare minimum." Fae said, before throwing an odd look at Rui. "You really plan to get five techniques at once?"

"Yeah, what's wrong with that?" Rui asked, tilting his head.

"Nothing." Fae replied. "It's just so strange because most people only get one or two techniques at a time."

"Huh?" Rui frowned. "That's so slow."

"That's normal dude." Kane shook his head. "You're the only one walking around learning four to five techniques at once, you potion junkie."

"Wait how many techniques have you guys learnt since joining the Academy?"

"Five." Fae replied quickly.

"Four." Milliana blankly said.

He had learnt twice as many Apprentice-level techniques in half the time. Even though his net amount of training time was not multiple times greater than theirs, the reason he was able to accomplish more was because the mental rejuvenation potion complimented his enhanced mind and cognition extremely well.

Concentration and learning were not linearly dependent on time spent learning. Longer periods of learning were better than multiple shorter periods of learning, as far as learning speed went. The reason people didn't learn for countless hours straight was because of exhaustion. It was only because of exhaustion that people resolved to shorter timeframes.

However, with mental rejuvenation potion, that rationale was no longer true. Mental and physical exhaustion could be dispelled. Thus, making Rui's training remarkably effective. He felt like a gamer who discovered a glitch in the game, using it to grind and level up relentlessly.

He turned to Kane, who hadn't responded yet.

"...Three." He looked away, embarrassed. Rui simply stared at him without a word.

"Hey don't look at me that way!" Kane complained. "My third technique was peak grade, ok? It took me forever to learn it!"

"Peak grade?" Rui asked, curiously. "Which technique was that?"

"You know." Kane continued. "The one I beat Fae with and the one I used when we fought against Kyrie."

"Ah..." Rui recalled. That technique was indeed absurdly powerful. He had to admit Kane's low number of techniques was justified indeed.

"Alright, good talk." Rui got up. "If we're doing this in a week then I have even more of a reason to go complete a solid mission before that, so I'll see you guys later. Bye"

He left after exchanging farewells with his friends. He couldn't help feeling a tinge of nervousness as he walked over to the mission library. He exhaled deeply as he reached the mission library, steeling his nerves before walking in.

He intended to complete a handful of missions over the next week no matter what!

Chapter 110: Just Enough Peace

"A bodyguard?" A young man glanced at the adolescent boy with the unusual hair and eyes with a mocking skeptical grin, before turning back to the scrawny frail man in front of him.

"Haha, you were so scared you got a boy younger than you as a bodyguard than you??" A rough voice contemptuously spat, sparking a bout of laughter.

Six young adult men had surrounded a frail-looking man and the boy behind him in a remote part of an outer district of Hajin.

"I didn't think it was possible Miguel, but you've become even more pathetic, you fucking wimp." One of the men turned to the boy. "Run home your mommy little boy."

Rui sighed, turning to Miguel. "See, this is why I told you wearing my uniform was a good idea."

Then six men toying with Miguel were not amused. "Hm? Did you not hear me?" One of them towered over the adolescent boy, trying to intimidate him. "I said scra-"

"I'll give you one chance." Rui cut him off. "Leave now and you won't get hurt."

The man sighed dramatically. "Kids these days think they're hot shit." He shoved his hands forward, aiming to push the boy down.

THUD

Before the man realized it, he found himself flat on his back on the ground.

"What the fuck?" The others rushed forward towards Miguel and Rui. Rui stepped forward nonchalantly as Miguel tripped as he stumbled back.

THWACK

BAM

POW

THUD

Over the span of five minutes, Rui pummeled all of them over and over, inflicting immense pain without inflicting permanent damage.

Significant permanent damage, that was.

"Pweash Schtawp!" One of the men, with a face more swollen than a melon managed to spit out.

"You idiots don't understand." Rui walked over to him, squatting to look him straight in the eyes. "It doesn't matter how many of you there are. If I ever catch so much as a peep of you grunts scratching so much as a hair on Miguel's head, I'll leave your legs intact but break what's in between them, got it?" He glared.

The man shivered as the passive mental pressure and intimidation of a Martial Apprentice weighed on him from. He nodded his head vigorously as tears streamed down his eyes.

"Good." Rui got up, walking over to Miguel. "Let's continue. We've wasted enough time already."

They walked side-by-side in silence, until Miguel nervously broke it.

"You know..." His voice trailed off as he scratched his head awkwardly. "I'm envious of you. You took them down so quickly. Part of me was scared but another part of me wished I could do that. Maybe then they would stop picking on me."

Rui wasn't sure what to say to that, he had never been good with pep talks.

"You flatter me." Rui said.

"No no. I'm being honest here. You're so young yet you've already become a Martial Artist." He insisted. "Compared to you, I feel worthless."

"You should hold more pride in yourself." Rui stated. "Getting accepted into the Kandrian Institute of Sciences, with merit that too, is a remarkable feat. Don't concern yourself over those low lives. Once the Academic term of the Kandrian Institute begins tomorrow, you'll move into the dormitory provided by the Academy, far and away from those morons who waste theirs and others' time tormenting people weaker than them to get an ego boost. You'll be surrounded by like-minded peers and will be able to engage in the pursuit of science unhindered."

Miguel was the son of a wealthy landlord, who had been living independently for a year, taking the entrance exam while also preparing for the new Academic term. Recently he had become victim to a local group of troublemakers who would pick on him when they learnt he was loaded, in the end the

bullying had gotten so bad that Miguel had decided to hire a Martial Apprentice bodyguard. Only now did he realize how wise a choice he had made.

Miguel nodded, laughing awkwardly. "You're four years younger than me, but it doesn't feel like I'm talking to a child."

Rui shrugged silently, not knowing what to say to that. Not that he wanted to engage in any further conversation with his client. He had learnt the hard way that getting emotionally invested in your clients and targets could lead to disastrous outcomes. At the end of the day, this was a job that paid the bills and the techniques.

He did not want to get invested in each and every client. Detaching his emotions to a certain degree from the mission would do him well, and allow him to remain objective.

Still, he could empathize with Miguel's situation quite well. Due to his asthma, he was unable to engage in friendship much at all. By the time he was in high school, he had long turned into a socially awkward loner, albeit bright kid. The type the boys and girls would call lame or nerdy. This, of course, led to bullying. Except Rui wasn't able to hire a Martial Apprentice for a bodyguard back on Earth.

The rest of the walk back home was a peaceful quiet. That day was the last day of the mission and Rui was practically done. This was what a grade one mission looked like, Rui had come to learn. Only now that he possessed a frame of reference did he realize just how ridiculously under-graded his first mission was.

Grade one missions were like walks in the park, but they paid less than his first mission. Bella had beefed up the bonus reward to ensure the mission gets picked sooner.

Rui had to admit, Kane was right. Even if they were insignificant compared to his first mission, completing missions like these and earning the gratitude of an alive client was worth it.

After despair and grief being what he last saw on his first client's face, these missions were like a soothing healing potion, slowly healing his wound.

Tomorrow was the team party mission, he had had just enough peace in the past week to dip his toes into his second high-grade mission.