

Martial Unity 161

Chapter 161: Outcome

Most fights ended anti-climactically. In most cases, there wasn't a last-minute powerup, a last-minute turn-around, a last-minute victory. In most cases, fights ended exactly how one would expect it to. There was no flashy clash, high-risk decisions from both sides or high stakes. The winner simply won, and the loser simply lost.

This was the cold unromantic reality of Martial conflict, of the martial World.

Yet every once in a while, this truth was broken.

Fights where one combatant was clearly losing, ends up winning. Despite all odds, despite all the damage one had suffered, one occasionally managed to win. These were rare and marvelous moments, where the losing fighter managed to defy all odds and deny his or her fate.

Unfortunately for the beast, this wasn't one of those times.

The beast was covered in blood, as multiple orifices gushed it out. It had begun losing its balance, speed and even the ability to dig underground.

Rui had splendidly managed to avoid any lethal attacks, even if just barely at times. In the end, he had managed to pull through the worst of it.

BLAP

"ROOOOOAAAAAAR!" Its roars had lost all anger, leaving only despair and fear.

Rui had timed a Flowing Canon and an Outer Convergence attack perfectly well with a Blink, and had managed to damage its eye almost entirely. The beast had lost most of its vision, and now was flailing around wildly.

BOOM

BAM

POW POW POW

WHAM

Rui peppered it with strikes over and over, for nearly an hour.

And an hour later, the beast had died.

Rui even took the precaution of observing it with Seismic Mapping for another ten minutes, just to ensure that there was no chance whatsoever that this creature was still alive. At a distance of five meters, he would be able to hear its heart beating.

Once he was finally convinced that there was no life left. He heaved a deep sigh of relief and collapsed to the ground.

He was truly exhausted, even the continuous usage of Helical Breathing was not enough to preserve even a decent amount of his energy.

He reached for his belt, opening the pouch and taking out a healing potion. The first healing potion he'd needed in the entirety of the mission. The beast had left many acid burns throughout their long, drawn-out fight. Each time it had burned immensely, but Rui expressionlessly bore the pain, since he knew, he didn't have to worry about flesh injuries since they could be healed easily with healing potions.

What he had to avoid were lethal injuries, since the low-grade standard-issue healing potions would not heal that. He deeply inhaled the gas that had been stored as a pressurized liquid, allowing it to reach the deepest parts of his lungs via Helical Breathing so that as much blood as possible would come into contact with it, to hasten the healing process.

Ten seconds later, his skin was back to normal.

But he felt even greater exhaustion.

Healing potions hastened the natural healing speed of the human body, meaning the nutrients, compounds, substances and stamina for the newly regenerated tissue came from himself, draining his energy even more.

He quickly proceeded to consume a mental and physical rejuvenation potion, to invigorate and energize his body.

After that, it was just a simple matter of following post-mission protocols for Hunter missions. First, he turned off the eco-survey device, he had been told that it saved data automatically so he didn't need to bother with manual operation of it too much. Part of the data would be sent to the ministry apparently, while the vast majority of it would need be to handed in, a limitation Rui found interesting.

He then indicated the successful completion of both objectives of the nested mission through the standard mission-tracking device given to him by the Martial Union.

Aaaaand he was done!

A deep sense of accomplishment and relief had filled his body.

"Phew." Rui sighed, as he gathered his many tumultuous thoughts. It had been one hell of a mission, but he felt quite accomplished. His first hunting mission was a dashing success. It was an eye-opening experience as well in many ways. He had come to realize that he quite liked the adventurous spirit of hunting missions. It felt open-ended and free, he had never experienced a mission with as much as freedom as the one he had just undergone.

('Well, that's only because I've undergone stuffy defense-class missions all this time.') Rui mused. Bodyguard missions were the most restrictive class of missions among all, in many ways.

Rui ended up enjoying the experience of hunting missions so much that he realized he might want to shift to hunting-class missions entirely.

('No.') Rui shook his head. He was unprepared and undeveloped for hunting-class missions and he knew it. This mission had shown his Martial Art was still not as broad and wide as he would have liked it to be, from the compatibility of his techniques with beasts and the natural environments to the compatibility of the VOID algorithm and non-human targets.

('I have a long way to go.') Rui sighed, getting up. He had sat around for long enough, and the rejuvenation potions had made him quite energetic.

('Maybe I should go for another mission, or maybe I should get some sleep.') Rui shrugged. The effectivity of mental rejuvenation potions would wear off soon and it had indeed been a while since he'd gotten some sleep.

Just then

BEEP BEEP

The mission-tracker device had received an notification.

('Urgent summon back to the Martial Academy?') He frowned as he read the message. What could be so urgent that they summoned him back right after a successful completion of the mission? Had he waited too long after the completion of the mission?

He shrugged, mystified as he hurriedly began jogging towards Hajin. He took one last glance at the Shaia Plains, before turning his back and heading back as fast he could.

He didn't think the urgent summon would occur for trivial reasons.

What could the Martial Union want from him so urgently? Rui wasn't sure, but there were several general possibilities. They wanted something from him obviously, the only real possibilities were his Apprentice Realm combat prowess and his knowledge.

Why would they want his Apprentice Realm combat prowess urgently? There was no shortage of Martial Artists in the Academy, unless the town of Hajin had suddenly been attacked by a horde of monsters or something, it was impossible for them to want his Martial prowess this desperately.

That left information, what information did he possess that the Martial Union didn't? Well, there was his scientific and combat knowledge and research from Earth, but obviously that was not why they were calling him. There was something that they knew he knew, they wanted.

Information about the latest mission? This was the only real possibility as far as Rui could think of. There was something about this mission that the Martial Union needed him for.

But he had already sent the Ministry of Ecology and Environment extensive data via the eco-survey device.

Furthermore, even if they didn't urgently summon him, he was naturally going to make his way to the Martial Union. So why the rush?

('It means there's something of such importance and magnitude, that every second matters.') Rui realized as he sprinted towards the town of Hajin.

Something to do with his mission.

Something that was extremely urgent.

Some need of theirs that only he could fulfill.

('Information about my mission definitely fits the first and third condition, but why would information about a completed mission be so urgent?') Rui frowned, when suddenly a horrifying possibility crossed his mind.

"Could it be that the beast is still alive?" Rui gasped, before calming down and shaking his head. ('That's impossible.')

He had taken extreme precautions to ensure the beast was dead, there was almost no way whatsoever that the beast could possibly be alive, unless it was immortal.

Of course, since this was a fantasy world, there were no limits. But if the beast was immortal it wouldn't have been so afraid of death and risks, yet it clearly was.

"It must be something else." Rui concluded. From his analysis, it was quite likely that the Ministry of Ecology and Environment had identified the species of the beast and had consequently discovered something about the beast that was quite alarming and required his intelligence immediately.

Maybe the beast's body self-destructed in a gigantic explosion ten minutes after its death. Thus, the Martial Union had sent him an urgent summon to save his life? The mission-tracker was not capable of facilitating two-way conversations, after all.

It was hard to say.

Rui shook his head, putting aside these superfluous thoughts, the best thing he could do right now was rush back to the town of Hajin.

As he sprinted back, the dawn had begun to crack through the veil of darkness and night, illuminating the Earth. It was only then that Rui had realized how long the fight against the beast had taken. As a beast its endurance was otherworldly, its size also allowed it to take damage from Rui's smaller attacks that didn't penetrate it too deeply.

Rui had had to pepper it with an unbelievable amount of strikes, not even Dalen would have been able to survive that onslaught if he did nothing but stand and take it.

As time passed, Rui eventually reached the town of Hajin. He had to slow down once he reached the commercial districts of the town. The morning rush was truly insufferable, making Rui glad that he spent most of his life far away from it. He wouldn't be able to deal with it on a daily basis.

Soon enough, he reached the Martial Academy.

"Apprentice Rui Quarrier."

"Miss Helga." Rui frowned, recognizing the official from the Ministry of Ecology and Environment that was in charge of his mission.

Each commission filed by the ministry to the Martial Union was handled by an individual official that kept tabs on the mission and ensured due process and protocols was being followed.

"Your arrival is timely." She informed. "Please submit the eco-survey device and proceed with the post-mission protocols immediately, we don't have much time."

"Can you inform me about the reason for the urgent summon?" Rui frowned as he handed the eco-survey device to the Martial Union staff.

She paused for a moment before replying. "I suppose we can tell you, especially since it may yield some useful results to us."

Rui's eyes sharpened at those words.

"I'll explain as we head to the commission department, we are truly short of time." She said, continuing only after they had entered an empty office in the commission department of the Martial union.

"After you fulfilled the first objective and recorded the appearance of the target of your mission, we compared the image with our database of the animal kingdom, eventually, we got a hit for its species. Unfortunately, the result was problematic."

She pulled out a device, fiddling with it until it projected an image on the table.

('Woah.') Rui carefully scanned the image. It was an image of the beast he had fought.

('No not quite right. A different beast of the same species.') He realized as his eyes widened.

"This is an extremely rare species known as the earthen basilisk." She explained. "It's a species non-native to the Kandrian Empire, or any other human colony as far as we are aware. The only spotting of a creature of this species was far west of the Kandrian Empire well into the Beast Domain. We suspect that the target earthen basilisk of your mission must have migrated into the Kandrian Empire through our Mantian region, recently."

('Interesting.') Rui couldn't help but think. "So, what exactly is the problem here? What does this have to with my urgent summon?"

She hadn't yet divulged this.

"I was getting there." She replied, before continuing. "One of the few known facts about the earthen basilisk is that they're asexual hermaphrodite reproducers, meaning they reproduce without mating. The reason we summoned you urgently was because we need every ounce of information you can provide us... because this creature's reproduction rate is proportional to its diet and food consumption rate."

Rui's eyes flew wide open at that statement. The creature's reproduction rate was directly proportional to its food consumption rate? Meaning the more it ate, the more it reproduced?

"But it has done nothing but eat like a monster for the past month." he said with a pale face.

"Exactly." Helga nodded with a grim expression. "We require you to tell us everything, there is a lot at stake here. More than you can imagine."

Chapter 163: Elaborations

Rui recalled jokingly thinking that the reason he was urgently summoned was because the town of Hajin was under attack.

Now, after what Helga had told him, it didn't seem as funny as before.

"I don't understand." He replied, shaking his head. "How could this be true? The earthen basilisk had been consuming deer and gazelles voraciously for nearly a month now. If it had been reproducing every time it went on a hunting spree, then the Shaia Plains would noticeably be flooded with many earthen basilisks."

How could this revelation possibly be true. Rui would absolutely have noticed if there were hundreds of earthen basilisks running around beneath the ground.

"It reproduces by laying eggs." She stated. "The eggs have a gestation period that is unknown unfortunately. It could be a day, a week or even a month. Furthermore, the earthen basilisk hatchlings don't immediately turn into full grown adults either. The immediate danger here is not their current destructive potential, but their future destructive potential as well as their extreme elusiveness and migrative capacity."

Rui understood, nodding. The limitations in his understanding in the field of ecology were starting to show. He had compensated for this gap during the mission with his intelligent deductive and inductive reasoning, but in front of an actual professional in the field, he was no more than a rookie, an inexperienced rookie

"Fortunately, the sightings of the earthen basilisk have been those of the target of your mission, and they were limited to the Shaia Plains." She said. "This strongly suggests that the migration of the earthen basilisks is extremely limited, if not entirely non-existent."

This made sense. If the earthen basilisks had already disseminated across the Mantian region, then there would damn well be more than the sighting of just one earthen basilisk in the Shaia Plains.

"Furthermore, sub-terranean travel is not limitless and flawless, there are certain topographies and land structures within and through which sub-terranean travel is utterly impossible. Mountainous and hill regions are an absolute no-go zone for them due to the land composition being saturated with layers of rock, granite and marble and other dense compounds." She explained. "Still, these are merely silver linings. Even with these caveats, they can spread extremely wide across the Mantian region."

"So what is the solution? Surely you don't expect a single or even a handful Martial Apprentices alone to deal with these?" Rui asked.

She snorted. "The danger and risk associated with this operation is far above what we can entrust Apprentices with. Especially Apprentices like yourself who aren't specialized in hunting, let alone sub-terranean hunting operations."

She shook her head. "We will be sending multiple squads consisting of a dozen Martial Artists in total, each with sub-terranean environment-oriented Martial Art, led by Martial Squires."

Rui's eyes widened at those words. If he was worried about how the Ministry of Ecology and Environment were going to deal with this, he no longer was.

Martial Squires were not to be messed with. He knew the power of an adult earthen basilisk, and he knew the power of a Martial Squire. If dozens of Martial Apprentices specialized in sub-terranean environments led by Martial Squires with similar specializations were to hunt the earthen basilisks, then they stood no chance whatever!

Especially not in direct conflict, but even in general. If he with his singular Seismic Mapping could detect the earthen basilisk, then these sub-terranean specialists would most certainly be able to much, much more than just that!

"Even a single Martial Squire would be enough to annihilate an army of earthen basilisks." Rui said with a bit of restored confidence.

"Don't be so certain." Helga reprimanded. "If an army of earthen basilisks all attacked a Martial Squire, then yes, the Martial Squire is almost guaranteed to succeed. But the problem with these creatures isn't their offensive capability. It's their survivability and elusiveness as I mentioned earlier. Their high sub-terranean travel allowed them to survive even the extraordinarily dangerous environments of the Beast Domain, despite their extreme weakness."

" 'Despite their extreme weakness?' " Rui echoed, looking at her with skepticism. The earthen basilisk was not extremely weak, it had come close to killing him multiple times in their fight, and Rui had relied on preparation and some external help to create a scheme meant to take it down. It had given Rui a hell of a fight despite this and was very difficult and tiring to take down.

She simply snorted in the face of his skepticism. "The Beast Domain are the uncolonized lands that exist in outside human civilization, towards the heartland and core of the continent. Part of the reason it is uncolonized is because of how dangerous it is. The power and threat level of the fauna in the Beast Domain is so high that even the earthen basilisk that had given you a lot of trouble is no more than an insect in the Beast Domain, struggling to survive."

Rui's eyes widened at those words.

"In fact, one of the reasons it likely migrated was that the Beast Domain was simply too dangerous and risky for it to live in. Predators far beyond anything you have ever tangled with, live and exist within the devastating environments of the Beast Domain. Someone like yourself wouldn't last more than a few days, if you're very lucky within that realm." She ruthlessly said. "For the earthen basilisks to have survived there for millennia as a species, shows how difficult they are to exterminate. That is why we are going all out and procuring the most suited and qualified Martial Squires and Martial Apprentices."

She said, before leaning forward. "And that is why we urgently summoned you, we need every ounce of your experience with the basilisk and mission. I did not provide you with all of this information to give you an educational lesson. I'm telling you this so you understand the importance of our demand. You will submit a scrupulously detailed report covering the entirety of your time spent in the Shaia Plains, minute by minute. You will include every scrap and ounce of information you can possibly conjure from your memories, regardless of how relevant and or irrelevant you deem, understood?"

Rui nodded vigorously. If all he had to do was write a report, then a report he would write!

Chapter 164: One Step At A Time

Rui had taken his time. It was their one demand, after all, to take his time and ensure the report was immaculate. He mentioned every detail in his report and statement, every single detail he could think of. He assumed the Ministry of Ecology and Environment would have experts pour over every word in his report and extract every ounce of potentially useful information from his words and supply it to the subterranean Martial Artists they were hiring from the Martial Union.

Once he was done, he submitted his final report and his duties ended.

Helga nodded as she scanned his report. "It was a pleasure working with you, Apprentice Rui Quarrier." She said, glancing at him. "We are quite impressed by your deductive insight and your resourceful tactical approach; we would be interested in having you retain us as one of your primary clientele, via the Martial Union."

Rui smiled wryly. "You flatter me, I'm just an inexperienced Martial Artist exploring my Martial Path in this wide world."

Helga raised an eyebrow, at those words. "I am not flattering you, Apprentice. Had this mission been undertaken by almost any other Martial Artist of your Realm and grade, it most certainly would have stalled and persisted for at the very least the entirety of the one month allocated to the mission, and perhaps even longer, this is the norm. The consequences of that would have undoubtedly been disastrous."

Rui had to admit she had a point. He didn't like tooting his own horn too much, but it was an objective fact that completing the mission in eight days was not just an impressive feat but an extremely fortunate feat for the Ministry. Had the mission taken a month or more, like she said, the odds that the offspring of earthen basilisk would have either wreaked havoc in the Shaia Plains, or migrated outside to other habitats in the Mantian Region, or both in succession, were quite high.

"Thank you." Rui nodded, accepting her praise. "But for now, I don't want to commit to any one field. I'm still exploring the world. Furthermore, I'm an all-rounder, thus I do not want to get too entrenched down a single path." He said, rejecting her subtle offer.

She nodded, uninterested in pushing further. Rui was definitely a good Martial Artist, but he was just one asset out of many assets that existed in the Empire.

"Well then, that brings about an end to our meeting." She said, getting up. "Thank you for your services."

"Thank you for your commission." Rui replied.

After having bade her farewell, Rui heaved a sigh of relief. His job was over, he had completely washed his hands of the incident. All he could do now was place his trust in the capable hands of the sub-

terrestrial-oriented Martial Artists of the Martial Union that the Ministry of Ecology and Environment would no doubt commission to take care of this matter.

He thought back to all the information she had divulged to him during their conversation. She had definitely revealed many important things during their conversation to contextualize how important any and all information he could provide to the Ministry through his report was. Although all of them were interesting, one particular topic had intrigued him more than most.

The Beast Domain.

It was vaguely common knowledge that the Beast Domain referred to the natural environments of the Panama Continent that were uncolonized by humans. What Rui did not know was the exact danger level associated with them.

This was why Helga's words had shocked him as much as they did. He obviously knew that Beast Domain was dangerous, but for even scary apex predators like the earthen basilisk to be no more than insects, that was a shocking statement to make. The way she made it sound seemed like the Beast Domain, by and large, was a domain exclusive to the Realm of Martial Squires and higher.

He did not expect that the Beast Domain, which constituted a solid chunk of the entire continent, would be more dangerous than he could handle!

As a Martial Apprentice, his recent string of successes and growth had given him a stronger and stronger sense of confidence, but when someone bluntly told him that he was too weak to survive outside human civilization, that just humbled him and made him realize that no matter how strong he had grown as a Martial Apprentice, he was still a Martial Apprentice, the lowest Realm of Martial Art.

He had a long, long path ahead of him.

However, this did not discourage him. If anything, it encouraged him. Knowing that there was an almost endless path he could walk down was exciting. His love for Martial Art, and his Martial Art; Project Water stemmed not from the power or utility it gave him. He truly loved the very concept at its very core for what it was.

This was why where others might have grown sullen and disappointed with their lacking power, but where other saw a shortcoming, Rui merely saw potential. His desire for power was not low, but his desire to indulge in the growth and development of his Martial Art was far, far stronger.

In fact, he would be far sadder and more devastated than happy if he ever reached the pinnacle of power where he was unable to grow any stronger than he already was, this would mean the day had come where he would no longer be able to develop his Martial Art. What would he do if he ran into this hurdle?

He shook his head, clearing out such silly thoughts. Reaching the pinnacle of power? That was such an arrogant thing to assume that even he felt silly.

He was incredibly far away from this stage. He was far away from even understanding how far away he was.

"All I can do is traverse my Martial Path." he murmured to himself with a hint of determination and clarity. "One step a time."

Chapter 165: Decisions

Rui had gotten a good long sleep that night, resting his weary mind and spirit. He slept rare, so when he did sleep, he slept for a good nine hours of deep sleep. Feeling rejuvenated, he was already prepared for the next mission.

He did not feel the need to take a break or unwind, he was determined to gather as many martial credits he could six months before the Kandrian Martial Festival. That meant pushing himself to the absolute maximum.

The reason he limited himself to at most six months before the Kandrian Martial Festival was because he needed time not just to master the individual techniques, but become familiar with using these new techniques with the rest of his Martial Art, he knew that the next round of training would also require the most amount of adjustment time.

The larger his Martial Art grew, the harder it was and longer it took to fully integrate new techniques. This was because having more options made it harder to choose. If one had to make a choice between two options, and two hundred options, one would obviously have a much harder time with the latter than the former.

This was an exaggerated version of what Rui was going through as he grew stronger. He had undergone three rounds of training ever since he became a Martial Apprentice.

The first round he had learnt very foundational techniques; Vital Pressure, Elastic Shift, Parallel Walk and Acute Edge and Helical Breathing. There was absolutely no large variety of options here. He barely had one technique for one field, and there were many fields his Martial Art needed to have had zero fields.

Making choices were extremely easy when you had only one choice.

The second round involved filling the gaping holes in his Martial Art; with techniques like Flowing Canon, Binding Lash, Shifting Silhouette and Mirage Dive.

These still weren't problematic because they only filled in the shortcomings, at the end of the day he still barely had one or two choices, at most three choices.

The third round, the last round of Apprentice-level training he had undergone was a bit different. Now his Martial Art had a total of fourteen techniques. This was a surplus compared to before, he had plenty of choices, permutations and combinations to choose from and that made decision making process harder than before.

More choices always meant more time to process, he needed to be able to master these techniques not just individually but also in conjunction with each other, He needed to treat them as part of one single Martial Art and individuals within a single group.

However, this could not be done through merely words. Last time it had taken merely a week to grow comfortable with all techniques, since Outer Convergence and Inner Divergence were passive and constant, as was Seismic Sensing. Blink had been the only issue.

However, Rui was quite certain that the next round of would be different. If he did in fact learn four to five techniques in totality, then he would have a total of eighteen to nineteen techniques in total. This was no trivial matter, he wouldn't be able to optimize his swiftness and comfort with using these techniques with each other in a week.

This is why he had set himself a time limit for missions such that he would have just enough time after the technique training to ensure that his fluidity and comfort in using these techniques in conjugation with each other and in rapid succession with each other.

Only then would he be able to participate in the Martial Festival with his Martial Art at its peak form. He would rather forgo mastering more techniques in order to truly master a few number of techniques. It meant nothing if he had all these powerful techniques if he did not know how to apply them optimally and apply them with other techniques optimally. His Martial Art would simply be no more than a haphazardous cluster of techniques that he wasn't able to use as well as he could have.

In many ways, techniques were like tools. Mastering a technique was like having a very high-quality tool, but if you did not know how to use these tools properly because you purchased too many too quickly, then you were inferior to someone who knew when and where to apply which tools and why.

Rui would always choose to be the latter than the former, he believed in control above all. And he would never forsake it for anything, no matter how powerful the technique or power in question was.

He did not intend to cross his limit, he would go all out in earning martial credits, and then ensure he spent them wisely.

For now, he could forget about the future techniques he intended to master, for he had yet to accumulate the martial credits he intended to accrue. It was for this very reason he was walking towards the mission library, after having taken a good long rest, he was already ready for his next mission. He intended to scan the library for the most profitable mission with a difficulty grade at or below his grade as a Martial Apprentice and complete as soon as he could.

He entered the familiar pentagonal library, immediately running his gaze across the entire library.

Last time he had picked a hunting-class mission, he wasn't sure if he wanted to go for yet another hunting-class mission right off the bat. He did intend to widen and diversify his experience.

There were three classes of missions he hadn't experienced yet.

The offense-class, the covert-class and the miscellaneous class. He had already ruled out two of them in his last visit, but he didn't feel as close-minded as he used to. Maybe he would end up enjoying all three of these classes of missions more so than he did his hunting mission.

"Decisions, decisions." he murmured, as he walked deeper into the library.

Chapter 166: Offense

As he was thinking about the classes of missions he immediately crossed out covert operations. The skill pre-requisite for the covert operations missions was much more niche and extensive than the other classes. One needed stealth, sensory, infiltration and espionage capabilities that Rui just frankly lacked.

While it was true that Rui had mastered Blink, Blink was not good enough all by itself. Blink had weaknesses, for example, it's timing and usage was largely out of Rui's hands. He could not use Blink whenever he wanted because he needed his opponent to Blink.

Furthermore, the greater the number target numbers, the exponentially harder to became to apply Blink. Because people didn't blink at the same time usually. These two rather big shortcomings made it harder for Rui to apply Blink the way covert operations required him to. Things like espionage and infiltration required timing, accuracy and precision control. Blink was simply not a technique whose timing could be controlled; this was simply a fact about the fundamental nature of the technique.

Perhaps in the next round of training he would learn some more stealth-oriented techniques.

('No...') He shook his head. ('The next round will be focused purely on head-to-head combat, because of the Martial Festival.')

Most of the competition in the Martial Festival was head-to-head one-on-one fights, stealth was largely unnecessary for the most part. He did not want to waste one his technique slots on learning stealth techniques that he almost certainly wouldn't use.

Although he intended to diversify his Martial Art to other classes, that would have to wait until after the Kandrian Martial Festival.

He turned away from the covert operations missions. Some day he would undertake one of them, today was not that day, however.

He really didn't want to go for a defense-class mission just yet.

"That leaves..." He turned to the offense-class section and the miscellaneous-class section of the library.

He immediately walked into the offense-class section. It was no contest between assault-centric missions and a messy hotchpotch of odd missions that had no place in the other classes of missions.

There was one thing about the offense-class section of missions that stood out from the other sections of the library.

A large majority of the mission bills, slotted in the shelves of the library had a special insignia inscribed on them.

('The Royal Insignia.') Rui mused. Assault was still largely outlawed within the Kandrian Empire, although most domestic physical disputes did not reach the stage of prosecution, the Kandrian government and the Royal Family would not tolerate the commercialization of violence within the borders of the country. That would simply give rise to tyranny on large scales as those with the greatest amount of wealth would be able to monopolize the greatest amount of violence.

Of course, like all illegal services and goods, there was an underworld with black market and mafia that provided such services. One less extreme example would be the local gangs that the Lowminers had effectively paid to handle their dirty business.

Therefore, an overwhelming amount of the commissions for unaggressed violence that the Martial Union received were from the Royal Family, via the law-enforcement branches of the Kandrian government.

These commissions had all received Royal authorization and were perfectly legal.

As Rui sauntered through the section he could see a variety of types of missions. Capture missions centered around known felons that were too dangerous for ordinary law-enforcement officers to arrest. Execution-missions where the mission objective was the death of a particular target or targets. There were missions centered around royally authorized destruction of property too. A lot of the missions were related to the criminal activities.

Even among them, a lot of them were connected with objectives concerned with the underworld and the mafia. It seemed as though the Royal Family was off-loading all this work to the Martial Union.

Which in a way made sense. The Martial Union and the underworld were probably eyesores to the Royal Family, that no doubt wanted to retain as much power and control over the Kandrian Empire as possible. These two goliaths stood in the way of its ambition and there wasn't much meaningful that the Royal Family could do.

Especially against the Martial Union, which was sorely vital and important to the Kandrian Empire.

The underworld, however, not so much. The Royal Family had effectively managed to get both of its eyesores to fight against each other by dumping a lot of the workload centered around the suppression of the underworld via the Martial Union. Rui was able to sense that much, atleast.

The underworld was too pesky of a problem and almost impossible to fight head-on against. This had much less to do with the Royal Family itself and more to do with human nature.

If Rui had learnt anything during his time on Earth was that you can't wage war against the underworld and win, for one very simple reason;

Where there was demand, there would also be supply. This was almost a law of humanity.

The government of the United States had waged war against illegal supply of alcohol and lost horribly. It was still waging war against drugs and was losing hilariously yet again.

Online piracy despite copyright laws was rampant. Pirates managed to supply movies, TV shows, novels and games and not a single damn person could stop it.

This was why the Royal Family had simply washed their hands of this matter to the Martial Union in exchange for an unfathomable amount of funds, resources and privileges.

Not that the Martial Union was having an easier time, but the commissions were useful because it kept the Martial Artists busy and allowed the Martial Union and its Martial Artists to be sustained.

Rui had decided.

It was time for him to undertake an offense-class mission.

Out of all the classes of missions, the offense class guaranteed combat much more than the other classes of missions did. It was literally a class of mission that revolved around attacking people!

This would be good experience for the Martial Festival. That alone was good enough reason for this decision.

Chapter 167: Imperative

Ever since Rui had been promoted to grade-five as a Martial Apprentice, he did not want to take any missions below his grade. Grade five missions were missions that posed some non-insignificant threat to Martial Apprentices. Either because a hostile Martial Apprentice was likely involved, because of extremely harsh environments, or because of powerful fauna.

The reason he had avoided missions with grades that were too low was because they did not push him as a Martial Artist. Grades one-to-four were trivially easy ninety-nine percent of the time, and none of them could make him feel endangered or draw out his survival instinct.

They were simply inconducive to his growth.

Thus, he had simply walked past the four outermost racks and shelves of missions graded one-to-four, they were not worth his time.

He also avoided missions that were graded at five because of dangerous environments. Although he intended to eventually be able to adapt to any environment, that was not an immediate goal. His immediate goal was to gain more combat experience.

He looked for missions that involved Martial Apprentices.

Just as he was nonchalantly browsing through the section when he came across something that caught his eye.

[Offense-class mission: Capture-Execution mission

Mission description: Objective of the mission is to eliminate a child-trafficking ring situated in Hajin and capture the ring leader.

Difficulty Grade: 5

Target location: (13.4765, 7.8967)

Mission Commencement: Immediate

Mission time period: 12 hours.

Successful Completion Remuneration: 4 gold coins and 9 silver coins / 130 martial credits.]

Rui's eyes sharpened when he saw that the target of the mission was child-trafficking ring. He did not like people who inflicted suffering and pain against innocent people for no good reason, but he genuinely hated it when children suffered knowingly because of human greed and lust.

This was especially so because he had been the victim of kidnapping by a child trafficker as a kid. Although that event had fortunately not left any real trauma on him, it did make him more sensitive to the issue. Child-exploitation as an industry earned his unadulterated hatred.

Especially because his family in the Quarrier Orphanage was largely comprised of children, the very thought of them ever having to undergo what he did made his blood boil.

He had managed to come out largely unscathed because he was already an adult and because of the inspiring words of the Martial Artist who had saved his life, he couldn't say the same about the many children who fell prey to these disgusting human beings. No, to even call them humans was an insult.

Already, he was feeling quite motivated to undertake this mission.

He glanced at the location coordinates, noting something very odd.

('Four digits after the decimal?') He frowned. ('This means they almost know the exact location of the child-trafficking ring's base.')

The coordinate system was applied over the entirety of the town of Hajin, as well a large portion of surrounding lands. This mission having four digits likely meant they had narrowed down the location to within a handful of town blocks, at the very least. The fact that they hadn't completed the operation yet and had instead commissioned a Martial Artist from the Martial Union yet meant that the presence of a Martial Apprentice was needed.

Which likely meant that the child-trafficking ring was extremely large and were armed to the teeth with weapons.

Or that there was a Martial Artist involved.

Or both.

He wasn't particularly surprised that a Martial Artist was involved, there were many low lives that used their Martial prowess to earn tons of money. The underworld was quite lucrative and there were many Martial Artists that delved into it. Martial power was quite valuable in the underworld, since most Martial Artists were monopolized by the Martial Union, and almost all of the remaining by the Royal Family. The few remaining Martial Artists were heavily sought after in the underworld.

Rui turned towards the gigantic map on the wall to see exactly what part of the Hajin map these coordinates corresponded to when his eyes widened with shock.

('This district...') He gazed with shock at the map. ('It's the district closest to the Quarrier Orphanage!')

Immediately, this mission was no longer just a matter of martial credits, or even his strong grudge against those that made children suffer.

Now it was his absolute imperative! He did not want to entrust this mission to anybody else. There was too much at stake here for him to be nonchalant. Maybe the probability of the Orphanage wasn't super high, but the Orphanage, a gathering of children being safe under these circumstances?

Hell no.

If anything ever happened the Quarrier Orphanage because of these bastards, Rui would never be able to forgive himself, especially now that he knew of this particular risk, he simply couldn't proceed about his day like nothing ever happened.

Rui even recalled something Lashara had told him when he had returned home during the Winter holidays.

She had told him that there had been some child-trafficking busts on the outskirts of Hajin, and the number of homeless children in Hajin had increased as an inevitable result. The Quarrier Orphanage had adopted some of the children to the Orphanage, Lashara was too kind to let these kids suffer without shelter and food.

Rui immediately picked the mission bill from the slot and headed over to the registrar to have it registered to him. He had decided he needed to fulfill this mission no matter what.

Hell, he would complete this mission even if the reward was nothing more than peanuts. No, he would complete this mission even if he had to pay money himself! When it came to his family, Rui no longer cared about the material benefits the missions anymore, he needed to complete this mission no matter what.

Once he registered himself as the applicant for the mission he sat down and opened the mission bill, intending to pour over every ounce of information that existed about this mission.

Chapter 168: Operation

Rui spent quite some time pouring through the data available to him. He wanted to make sure he knew this case inside out and backward front. The more familiar he was with this case, the better he would handle this mission.

The mission bill first provided a general background of the case to ensure that the Martial Artist accepting the commission would have context as to what the mission was about.

The child-trafficking centered in Hajin wasn't small or old. Hajin was a huge commercial trade hub in addition to being residential town, there were many huge industries for a huge market and an unfathomable amount of good and services were exchanged every day.

Not all of those goods and services were legal, of course. Drugs, forbidden esoteric resources, illegal services and other more nefarious goods and services were offered.

Among the more heinous of them, was the child-trafficking industry. There were plenty of sick disgusting people with money and power that had an extremely perverted nature. These people were regular clienteles of the child-trafficking industry, and their patronage was what sustained this horrible industry.

This mission was commissioned by the Kandrian Bureau of Investigation, as per the protocols established in the Kandrian Martial Covenant. When the difficulty of any operation exceeded a certain

threshold, the Kandrian Bureau of Investigation need merely commission the Martial Union and within a stipulated time period, they would have a Martial Artist aiding their operations.

In this case, the intelligence that the Kandrian Bureau of Investigation had obtained over this particular investigation was that the ringleader of this particular child-trafficking gang was likely a Martial Apprentice and, in turn, they had immediately commissioned the Martial union for a Martial Apprentice, as well.

The intelligence that they had over the child-trafficking ring came from previous operations centered around the child-trafficking underworld industry based in the town of Hajin. In the past there had been many busts, but the Kandrian Bureau of Investigation had failed to capture the ringleader because of his Martial Prowess.

The reason they had commissioned for a Martial Apprentices ahead of time this time was because they had strong reason to suspect that the ringleader of the particular child-trafficking ring that was the target of the operation, was likely the same ringleader of the previous child-trafficking operations that had existed in the past in the town of Hajin.

The mission bill even elaborated on why this was the case.

The child-trafficking ring had first been detected when the Kandrian Bureau of Investigation had received intelligence from their infiltrated spies in certain high-profile companies that certain wealthy merchants in the town of Hajin were likely holding children in captivity. Soon after, the Kandrian Bureau of Investigation had obtained a warrant and upon conducting a raid, they had successfully rescued multiple children held in captivity. The wealthy merchants in question had been arrested on six accounts of child abuse.

Upon a strict thorough investigation and interrogation, the criminals confessed and disclosed the means by which they acquired these children.

That was when the Kandrian Bureau of Investigation had noticed patterns very similar to what they had seen in the past from this particular wanted felon.

The delivery of the children, the means of payment, the means of communication and other parameters of the entirety of the modus operandi from the intelligence they had obtained from the confession of

the convicted child offenders strongly matched the operations they had dealt with this particular child trafficking ring in the past.

This immediately led them to strongly suspect that the ringleader in question was the same Martial Artist felon who had evaded capture in the past. Although there were strong differences in the modus operandi of their current target and the child-trafficking rings of the past, these fell within the expectations of the Kandrian Bureau of Investigation of someone who was clearly switching his or her game up to shake the scent off them, but the intelligence department strongly suspected that this known child trafficking criminal was connected to the case.

The mission bill then proceeded to expound upon the suspected identity of the ringleader.

[Known aliases: Martha Myers, Jenna Jill, Ciara Carter

Sex: Female

Estimated age: 30-35

Martial Art Realm: Apprentice

Known felonies: 136 accounts of child trafficking, 81 accounts of kidnapping and 28 accounts of child abuse.

Bounty: 100 gold coin

...]

Rui actually widened his eyes in shock when went through her criminal record which was more extensively documented in the next few pages. This bitch was an actual predator of children unlike anything he had ever seen. She would give even a certain American financier whose name rhymed with Heffrey Jepstein a run for his money.

She was a veteran in the child-exploitation industry in the underworld, from what Rui could see, capturing her would save many potential victims in the future. Who knew how many children would end up falling prey to her in the future?

The mission bill then spoke about the operation itself. The Kandrian Bureau of Investigation had managed to narrow down the range of locations that potentially were the child-trafficking bases of the child-trafficking ring via evaluating the known information of their operations and applying logistical constraints and the high need for covertness, they were able to shortlist the set of potential locations and over time managed to obtain a key set of locations that would be the target of their operation.

What surprised Rui was that the Kandrian Bureau of Investigation actually had an internal Martial Artist from the Bureau that would also be participating.

He had forgotten that the Martial Union wasn't the only entity to have Martial Artists working for them, but this mission had reminded him of this fact. After all, this operation involved a Martial Artist from the Martial Union, a Martial Artist from the Kandrian government and a Martial Artist from the underworld.

Rui grew more and more engrossed into the planned operation of the Kandrian Bureau of Investigation, he hoped they knew what they were doing!

Chapter 169: To The End

Rui was initially surprised that the Kandrian Bureau of Investigation had deigned to commission a Martial Artist from the Martial Academy for this operation despite the fact that they already had a Martial Artist from the bureau taking part in the operation. Capturing a Martial Artist who was doing everything to avoid capture was much harder than defeating a Martial Artist in a head-on one-on-one fight.

This wasn't limited to Martial Artists either, it applied to people in general. Beating someone in a fight was easier than catching and single-handedly restraining them despite their resistance. If a person one was trying to capture simply ran away in the opposite direction with a ten-meter head start, the odds that one would close the gap, catch the person, be able to blatantly overpower them and endure any resistance they made and drag them to jail was extremely low.

In most cases, you would not catch up to them. Even if you somehow did, you would not be able to maintain hold were them, because it was unlikely you would get the right hold that would be able to restrict them, you would likely catch a pinch of their clothes, but that wasn't solid enough.

Even if you managed to get a strong hold of them, they could easily hinder you by dragging you to the ground, trying to wrestle their way out of this. The moment this happened, the odds that you would succeed in arresting them by yourself was very low, because now your advantage would be gone the moment it hits the ground.

Which is why the Kandrian Bureau of Investigation had commissioned an extra Martial Artist for the operation, only then did they have a realistic chance of capturing the ringleader. Ideally, a squad of Martial Artists would have been best since it would have guaranteed victory, but they couldn't afford to spent such resources for a single Martial Artist target and that too, only a strongly suspected Martial Artist target, not confirmed.

The Kandrian Bureau of Investigation did not have the luxury of limitless funds and intel. They simply had to make do with what they had and try to make the best of it.

The actual operation was quite simple in and of itself. The Kandrian Bureau of Investigation simply intended to surround the area and cut off any escapes and exits, then they would break into every location and cleanly search the entire area for the targets of the mission, eliminating the one by one. They would also free and rescue any captive children and immediately extract them to safety, and ideally, they would be able to capture the ringleader.

Rui and the Martial Artist of the Kandrian Bureau of Investigation would be along with infiltration squad and were to remain on high alert employing sensory techniques to ensure that the ringleader of the child-trafficking ring would not be able to somehow escape by evading detection.

Rui was confident he would be able to immediately detect the usage of any Apprentice-level maneuvering technique that allowed a Martial Artist travel at speeds exceeding the human limit via the Seismic mapping technique. The seismic radiation from these techniques definitely exceeded what normal humans produced and were capable of producing.

The moment he detected the ringleader, he would immediately dash towards the ringleader along with the Martial Artist of the Kandrian Bureau of Investigation. Together, they should be able to capture her. Rui didn't think she would be able to break out of the encampment and the two of them and escape safely all by herself.

The operation would begin after Rui was arrived and briefed. Although all relevant information already existed in the mission bill, it was still better to establish a mutual understanding of everybody's role in the operation.

The number of officers taking part in the mission was a total of eighty-nine, not including Rui and the Martial Artist of the Bureau.

The rest of the mission bill went more into the standard protocols Rui had to abide by.

The first impression he got was that he had very little freedom in Royal authorized missions such as this particular mission. The protocols and guidelines had made it clear that the Kandrian Bureau of Investigation had full control over all operations and could effectively order Rui specifically in regards to his contribution within the mission, the moment he accepted the mission.

This was the polar opposite of his hunting-class mission where he had an immense amount of freedom on how to fulfill the mission, to the point where he could try out wacky novel ways of fulfilling the mission based on hastily constructed hypotheses and evaluations.

Here, the Kandrian Bureau of Investigation would retain all decision-making power. Rui was to simply assist with the mission however they deemed fit.

It's not that he didn't understand the reason for these protocols. Ultimately this was quite a serious matter that was exclusively the jurisdiction and responsibility of the Kandrian government. Allowing the Martial Union to have control over such operations gave the Martial Union a dangerous amount of power and authority that could allow them to easily cause massive problems to the Kandrian government and the Royal Family.

It was far too great of a risk for the Royal Family to undertake, and so the jurisdiction and authority of these missions was something the Martial Union had to inevitably concede to the Royal Family, as per the terms of the Kandrian Martial Covenant.

Of course, in exchange the Martial Union got tons of funds, resources and privileges for making such concessions to the Royal Family. Compared to the soft power of having authority over these operations,

the Martial Union was plenty comfortable settling for the concrete benefits that these material exchanges provided.

It was ultimately a win-win for both parties. But Martial Artists like Rui had to suffer being a subordinate for the Kandrian government specifically in regards to their participation in the operation, so he wasn't feeling all too happy about it.

Still, the success of this mission was personally important to him, and having a diverse experience would always do more good than harm.

Thus, Rui intended to see this mission to the end.

Chapter 170: Introduction

Rui closed the mission bill, having learnt everything he wanted to learn. He immediately headed to the commissions department to finish the application.

The paperwork for a royal mission was actually much more extensive than those of missions from other classes, this was because he had to sign many more acknowledgements, non-compete agreements, non-disclosure agreements with the Kandrian government before he was allowed to undertake these missions officially.

Once he completed the exhausting amount of due process, he immediately headed towards the dispatch facility as the commissions department informed the Kandrian Bureau of Investigation that their commission had been accepted.

Even the dispatch procedures were different.

For one, in addition to the standard gear that Rui obtained, he was also given a badge with the Royal Insignia. After all, he would be acting on behalf of the Kandrian government and by extension and the Royal Family by extension. He possessed a greater amount of authority over civilians just by being a government authorized agent.

Furthermore, the consequences of attacking him or hurting him were much more severe than if he was undertaking a private commission from civilian clientele. After all, when he undertook commissions civilian clientele, he was officially just a service provider accepting commissions via a private union, although assaulting people was a crime in the Kandrian Empire, he wasn't any more special than any other civilian, officially, anyway.

But whilst operating in a royal commission, he was temporarily now a royally-authorized agent. Assaulting him was a far more severe a crime under these circumstances.

Rui was beginning to understand the allure of royal commissions. Initially, he didn't understand why Martial Artists would undertake such stuffy missions outside of having a Martial Art suited to offense-class missions. But the perks of royal commissions were much stronger than those private commissions. Having such a deterrence on your side must be quite reassuring, Rui realized.

He quickly donned his gear, the royal badge and his mask. He absolutely did not want to let his identity slip up so he even procured a full-head mask that did not allow even a hint of his facial features to let slip. He even wore super-thin contact lenses that distorted his unique eye-colour.

And he set off as soon as he finished the dispatch protocols.

The Kandrian Bureau of Investigation had a branch in most towns in the country. The Hajin branch was actually quite close to the Martial Academy, which was near the center of the town itself. Rui reached it within ten minutes.

The Kandrian Bureau of Investigation had a rather huge headquarters, not as unreasonably large as the Martial Academy, but quite extravagant nonetheless.

When Rui entered the gates and front door, he immediately walked into what looked like a security checkpoint and a reception.

It was a rather large hall with a wide table with at the opposite end, occupied by many receptionists.

"Are you here for a bureau commission, sir?" A receptionist asked him when he approached the desk.

"Yes." He nodded.

"Please provide the verification token tell me your mission code." She requested.

"HJN03486" Rui replied, as he reached for the token that contained the verification code that proved that Rui was indeed the Martial Artist assigned to the stated mission and not some random imposter.

"Alright. You have been verified." She stated, as she stamped his token with the royal insignia with strange coloured ink. "Please proceed to the commission department of the Bureau and provide this token to them, you will be guided to your assigned supervisor."

Rui nodded, he'd expected the process to not be as simple as bodyguard or hunting mission due processes were.

"Office number 28, third floor." The attendant at the commission department told him. "Your supervisor is special agent Effels Muhil

Rui sighed as he went on yet another journey in the elaborate facility, the levels of due process reminded him of airline industry back on Earth.

"Ah, Martial Artist." A woman in her thirties sitting at a desk said. She glanced at him with her judging green eyes. "I am Effels Muhil. Please provide me with your token."

Thankfully she only took a glance at it before returning it. "I am your supervisor for this mission. Follow me, we will meet up with the rest of the members partaking in the operation your mission is centered around."

('Finally.')

"Have you memorized the intel in we provided to you via the Martial union?" She asked him sharply.

"I have." Rui said, before proceeding to paraphrase all important and relevant information.

"Good." She threw him an approving look.

Soon they entered a dispatch facility with dozens of men in Kandrian combat gear had been occupying. Among them, an older man with black and white hair and a scarred face, noticed them approaching.

"Effels." He said simply. "That him?" He asked throwing a skeptical glance at Rui.

"Special agent Barnard." She addressed with formality. "This is the commissioned Martial Artist from the Martial Union."

Instantly, the atmosphere changed.

Rui could feel the eyes of all the agents gathered staring at him. He could even the amusement, skepticism and even the confusion of all the agents that were supposedly part of the operation.

"He looks like a kid." One of the murmured.

"Can he do shit?" Another asked.

"This ain't a picnic lil boy." Another grumbled.

Rui sighed, he was about to focus his mind to pressure them and trigger their subconscious sense of danger with a little bloodlust when suddenly.

"He's the real deal alright." He heard the soft voice of a woman.

Rui didn't even turn around to understand who she was.

('Martial Apprentice.') He glanced at the newcomer.

She was a short woman, even shorter than he was despite being an adult. She had long brown hair and eyes, and subtle aura that emanated a faint danger. He wasn't able to identify the Type of her Martial Art from just observing her, which was unusual for him

"Sorry I'm late everyone." She smiled, before turning towards Rui. "I am Neira Falual, pleasure to meet you!"