

Martial Unity 781

Chapter 781: First Blood

The tunnels in the Shionel Dungeon were effectively no different from 'cracks that formed between each of the larger spaces that had been dubbed as floors. What that meant was that there were tunnels that connected every floor with every other floor.

However, there were also a huge number of tunnels that simply ended in dead-ends, sometimes extending for dozens of kilometers before still ending in dead-ends. What that meant was that anybody aspiring to enter the dungeon would need to risk an immense amount of failure, as well as losing track of where they were and how to get out.

The Shionel Dungeon's dangers were not limited to just the monsters. Even Martial Squired could get endlessly lost inside the dungeon if they were not careful.

Thus most Martial Squires ventured down known routes to known floors.

The First Floor of the Shionel Dungeon had been quickly discovered once the dungeon was discovered, probably due to close it was to the surface of the elevated land, and from there, numerous runnels leading to the first floor had also been reverse-tracked. From there, tunnels to other floors had been quickly discovered by Martial Squires who chose to venture further out.

"As much as I instantly want to pick a new route, I think we should get ourselves accustomed to the Shionel Dungeon's environment first," Rui told Kane. "It's one thing to make preparations, it's an entirely different to have experience and familiarity."

Kane nodded. "I'm one hundred percent on that."

He looked particularly relieved that they were not jumping some unknown cave tunnel right off the bat.

The two of them quickly strode forward before taking their very first step into the Shionel Dungeon.

"Woah," Rui's eyes widened.

"This..." Kane grew speechless as the two of them walked in deeper.

Just stepping into the dungeon was a novel experience.

Their senses all diminished drastically and continued doing so the deeper they stepped in, more so than they did on the outside due to being surrounded by the walls of the tunnels of the Shionel Dungeon.

Rui couldn't believe that his eyesight felt worse off than it was when he was a human!

It grew deathly silent inside the dungeon as even sound was extremely dampened inside the dungeon.

"Rui... Are you still able to sense properly with that technique?" Kane asked, his voice growing a tad bit edgy.

"Yeah," Rui nodded calmly. Even now he could feel the layout and the internal structure quite carefully. "It's working just fine, as expected."

"You're absolutely sure, right?" Kane asked once more.

"Absolutely," Rui nodded. "Trust me, I got you back."

Rui turned back as he admired the tunnels. "They're prettier than in the pictures."

The esoteric mineral resources that were processed into the vegetation of the dungeon, as well as the earth, glowed with light. It glowed with its own light despite absorbing light from other sources that reached it or passed by it. Thus not only was vision hindered, but the little field of view that the Martial Squires had left was also infringed upon with the light that was given off by the esoteric vegetation and the earth.

"Pretty, but goddamn annoying when you can't see what you want to," Kane grumbled.

"This is how humans feel all the time. Honestly, how do they even manage?" Rui sighed before his eyes widened.

('Wait, have I subconsciously disassociated with the human species?') Rui wondered with incredulity as he heard himself utter something he never thought he would have.

"We were human ourselves at one point you know," Kane murmured. "But that feels like a long time ago. Even though I've been human longer than I've been a Martial Artist."

('I've spent a whole lifetime as a human,') Rui thought to himself. ('A crippled one at that. And yet, I identify less with those experiences than the five years that I've been a Martial Artist.')

The experiences of discovering the Martial Path, and discovering the Martial Body were both truly life-changing, which made for the less time Rui had been a Martial Artist.

Rui shook his head. "Let's focus on the matter at hand. For now, we'll make our way down to the latest floors that are being explored and raided."

"Alrightey," Kane nodded.

The two of them cautiously headed down the tunnel as Rui paid deeper attention to his Riemannian Echo sense. The first floor was already within the range of his senses.

('Wow, there are a lot of people,') Rui noted.

That probably meant that there was nothing worth checking out there.

He did something that he hadn't yet applied practically, which was extending his Riemannian Echo in one direction.

The way he did this was by diverting all his focus and mental energy on interpreting the parts of the distribution of the Cryllin Stone and Grainer Pollen in his body that are needed to sense in a particular direction, increasing the distance and range he can sense in that particular dimension due to processing more information.

He could treat it as a less precise RADAR that swept across the entire dungeon. The range of the extended and focused sensory field was so wide that his sense enveloped not just the entire first floor, but also the second floor!

Just as he was marveling at the first floors, his eyes widened as something rapidly entered his Riemannian Echo.

SHING

He drew his sword as a sole monstrous catoblepas jumped out of a tunnel beside Kane.

SLASH

A single light swing of Rui's blade cut at the monster's skin, yet the ensuing wound was anything but proportional to the attack.

SPLAT

Blood gushed from a gigantic wound. That single swing had almost cleaved the monster, which resembled a fusion between a bull and several other beasts, in half.

"Shit!" Kane swore as he glanced at the corpse of the catoblepas with fear. "I hadn't sensed that coming."

"You haven't grown acclimatized to your new conditions," Rui explained. "You need to be more alert to sense things that you previously would have seen coming from a mile away."

"Damn, you're right... Thanks, Rui, I might be dead right now without you," Kane thanked him earnestly. "Still, I can't believe you almost cleanly split it with just a heavy nick!"

"Hehe..." Rui grinned. "It was even more effective than expected. Let's go kill some monsters, my friend."

Chapter 782: Second

Rui glanced at the ice-cold Bellhorn Steel blade in admiration and excitement, the blade's destructiveness to the Whitemane Dust present in the monster's body was greater than he had imagined. He had gained a lot more confidence in dealing with the monsters of the Shionel Dungeon. He hadn't had a chance to use the heating pipe that he had brought with him, but that was more meant for a situation when he was back up against the wall against a larger number.

Rui had to admit that he had grown a little too careless for a moment scanning distant locations away with his Riemannian Echo, that he didn't notice a monster arriving that close to them for quite some time.

He glanced down at the heavily sliced corpse. "But a catoblepas, huh? I heard they were supposed to be annihilated on the earlier floors, but I guess not entirely."

It must have been a straggler that managed to escape into the countless tunnels that existed in the Shionel Dungeon. Unless someone ran into it, they would never know it survived since nobody besides from him could surveil worth a damn inside the Shionel Dungeon.

"Come on, the first floor is just up ahead," Rui helped Kane up as they headed onwards, before eventually reaching their initial destination.

"Woah," Kane muttered when he finally got a look at it. "It's huge!"

The first floor had clearly been cleaned up especially well, to the point that the Shionel Adventurer Guild permitted the temporary occupying of it. Thus several patrons and merchants had set up outlets selling essential items like healing and rejuvenation potions.

Rui could already see that the Shionel Merchant Guild was clearly trying to push in the direction of private ownership and occupation of the Shionel Dungeon even before they started.

He had not forgotten his plan of selling map data of the Shionel Dungeon to the Shionel Merchant Guild, he had already been mapping the Shionel Dungeon in his head, carefully storing all the data that he had gathered with his Riemannian Echo in his Mind Palace.

He intended to put it to good use later on. He had not only been measuring the distance that he traveled relative to his own height which he had a precise measurement of, but he had also been documenting the 'footage' of his Riemannian Echo sense into the Mind Palace, going as far as to timestamp it.

"This does not feel like what I expected from a dungeon, I'm going to be honest," Kane scratched his head.

The overlapping image of a relatively peaceful floor was juxtaposed with the scary and dark image he had inside his head.

The Martial Squires on this floor was a tag bit more relaxed, and there was even a level of security in place, monitoring the tunnels to ensure that nothing came up and to warn the others if something did.

"The second floor's tunnel is that way," Rui gestured to a marked tunnel that let further down. "Let's get going immediately."

Rui kept Riemannian Echo up the entire time as they descended to the second floor.

Yet the change was abrupt.

The air grew more tense. Kane gritted his teeth as he felt his nerves tingling.

Rui narrowed his eyes as he never stopped monitoring their environment with Riemannian Echo.

"Monsters," Rui murmured.

"What?!" Kane whispered back with urgency. "Where?!"

"In all directions," Rui replied softly.

"Are they coming towards us?!"

"No," Rui shook his head firmly. "They're circulating in the tunnels, but they aren't moving towards us, they don't even know that we're here. They have the same limitations, after all. They cannot sense us as vividly."

Rui concentrated as he spotted several monsters lingering around in tunnels in the distance. He wanted to make sure none of them could approach them.

Soon enough, they reached the second floor, yet Rui stopped at a distance from them.

"What's up?" Kane frowned.

"It's time, get ready," Rui replied without expanding further.

Yet Kane understood what he meant, they had discussed their strategy plenty of times in the past, and he knew exactly what needed to be done.

He put his hand on Rui's shoulder before they began moving. Yet both of them disappeared into thin air as they walked towards an entrance into the dungeon.

Kane's eyes widened as they were greeted by dozens of rabbit-like creatures, their eyes were blood red with no pupils of any kind.

Rui and Kane quietly moved past them, without making so much as a peep. Kane looked quite nervous in contrast to Rui's calmness. He knew that Void Step has extremely empowered in the dungeon thanks to senses being jammed, there was zero chance that the bloodfury rabbits would be able to sense their presence.

"URGH!" Kane paused when a human voice grimacing reached them.

The two of them glanced over as they saw three Martial Squires bleeding profusely, being swarmed by the bloodfury rabbits.

FWHOOSH

SPLAT

"ARGH!" The Martial Squire in the center grimaced as a bloodfury rabbit took a bite out of his leg swiftly.

Kane exchanged a silent glance with Rui, but they never stopped, the technique only worked when they were moving. Rui shook his head and turned away from them.

He generally tended to help people around him if they needed help before his eyes, but that did not apply in risky situations that the people themselves have put themselves in, knowing full well the risks that came with it.

He could not afford to take the risk of helping the Martial Squires around him in the dungeon who may need help, especially when Kane's life was in the balance as well. He simply offered them a prayer as his eyes turned to their objective.

The glowing fruits, rocks, and veins popped out of the floor walls. He had long trained to distinguish between all of them, a nifty skill to have if he needed something specific, he readied his dimensional storage ring as he and Kane executed the maneuver they practiced.

Chapter 783: Massacre

The one flaw of the Void Step techniques was that the misdirection techniques were maneuvering-based. Kane misdirected attention in the opposite direction that he was heading, creating a large gap between where he was and where his opponents were directing their attention to.

Thus, they could not be stationary when extracting the esoteric ores from the walls. Thus Rui and Kane had practiced a method where they extracted esoteric horizontally, line by line from top to bottom, requiring them to move left and right by a section while Rui used his tools to pluck them out of the wall and into his dimensional storage ring.

He was initially surprised by how responsive the dimensional ring was. It operated based on a pretty nifty mechanism that could be activated at any given time.

He didn't spare the dying Martial Squires a second look, he did not want to concern himself with problems that were not his, nor ones he could afford to try and solve.

He extracted the toolset that he had procured discreetly to aid with the extraction of the fruits and the stones from the Earth. Thankfully, the process was rather simple. It was a matter of positioning the instruments, pressing a small lever that gained a grip on the stones and organic esoteric deposits in vegetation.

CRACK

He pulled out a giant glowing crystal, before tossing it into a portable bag that he would be filling before tossing into his ring. The two of them swiftly walked and sky-walked across an entire section of the huge floor for a few hours, filling up several giant bags worth of esoteric harvest.

"Unbelievable..." Kane murmured to himself as they walked past nearly fifty Squire-level bloodfury rabbits that completely ignored their existence.

He glanced at the corpses of the three Martial Squires that were previously fighting for quite a bit. Roots from the ground had already emerged, pulling their corpses into the ground.

Individually, each rabbit was at a low squire level. However, together, they were a menace that could overwhelm parties of weaker Martial Squires. Kane was not confident that he would be able to survive this floor without Void Step.

This made him feel a tinge of nervousness because he could not maintain Void Step forever, and the time period he could maintain it was especially limited when he had to use it on not just himself but also another Martial Squire.

"Rui, you have ten more minutes before I need a break," He panted before wiping some sweat off his forehead.

Rui simply glanced at him, unperturbed by his remark, nodding. "Gotcha. Let's get to the ground then. I want to be prepared for when the exact time comes."

"You're going to be alright, right?" Kane was worried.

He knew that Rui was strong, especially when he extensively prepared for certain circumstances as he had done so for the Shionel Dungeon. But, at the same time, could he truly handle dozens and dozens of low Squire-level creatures all by himself?

It was true that he had even seen one of Rui's countermeasures personally, Rui's sword attack possessed an absurd amount of lethality that one could simply not expect from seeing his swings.

Rui did not even bother replying, instead, he closed his eyes and began focusing.

A focused mind was vastly superior to a scattered one. And Rui could not afford to give anything but his very best.

"Fuuu..." He exhaled.

Kane was about to ask him again when his eyes widened upon a gush of pressure from Rui. Rui got rid of his Mind Mask as he drew his blade and procured his pipe, putting it to his mouth.

STEP

He immediately leaped out of Kane's reach all of a sudden, rushing towards the herd of bloodfury rabbits with his blade drawn and poised to swing.

"Wai-!"

SLASH

The initial attack killed five bloodfury rabbits in a single swing!

Unlike the bullish and massive catoblepas, the rabbits did not possess an outstandingly durable constitution. The second the freezing cold blade pierced their flesh, it was as though a grenade had been set off inside their body, and the flesh on either side of the blade blasted away from the freezing cold tethered Bellhorn Steel violently as the blade cleaved through the flesh of the monster like a knife through butter.

SPLAT

The remaining bloodfury rabbits did not even realize what had happened until after it had happened.

"SQUEAK SQUEAK SQUEAK!"

They aggressively lashed out at him in their reactionary aggression. Yet they couldn't help but falter when they senses his fearsome aura weighing down on them. His pitch-black pupils inspired their fear of death, while his blade caused it.

The Bellhorn blade ceased to be a blade. It had become an arc of destruction, annihilating every monster it so much as touched.

"FUUU..." he exhaled cracklingly hot air at three rabbits before him, enveloping them in extremely hot air. Their fur grew a shade lighter as the Mercurite esoteric hardened, paralyzing their movements.

SLASH

Another three monsters to his right died.

SLASH SLASH

Four bloodfury rabbits in front of him were cleaved in half before he smoothly transitioned to swing to his left, stepping about his position to accommodate the swings.

"FUUUU..." He froze six rabbits on the spot before his blade followed through a moment later, butchering the frozen bloodfury rabbits.

Rui ceased being a simple Martial Artist, it was as though he had become a sphere of death. A sphere that killed anything that dared entered it.

Every single bloodfury rabbit lashed out at him.

Every single one of them died.

Soon enough, there were none left.

SLASH

Rui killed the final bloodfury rabbit of the herd before exhaling and turning to Kane who retained the ability to use Void Step for himself.

"It's done,"

Kane was utterly speechless, staring at Rui with shock and awe.

"Come on, we have work to do,"

SHING

He sheathed his blade, walking back unperturbed at the carnage left behind.

Chapter 784: Carnage

Kane had watched the battle with an increasingly bewildered expression. Rui had already caught him off-guard when casually leaped out of Kane's physical contact, and outside of the influence of Void Step. He had almost had a heart attack.

"Wai-"

SLASH

Kane's eyes widened as Rui's blade disappeared and bloodfury rabbits split in half before his eyes. The battle abruptly began as the rabbit immediately pounced on the intruder that came out of nowhere and attacked their herd.

Yet despite swarming him with all their numbers, everything that came within a certain range split in half. It was as though there was a forcefield around Rui that cut anything that dared to cross it.

The domain encompassed by his swinging range ceased to be ordinary space. Instead, it had become a field of carnage, gushing with blood and death.

Kane observed Rui's movements in bewilderment, yet he didn't understand what was happening. Every time Rui inhaled from the pipe and exhaled onto his hapless would-be victims, they froze solid, before his devastating lethality annihilated them. They were entirely powerless.

Rui's face was covered in a malleable mask attached to it, yet Kane could still sense a cold ruthlessness on it. His reactions to the rabbits were excellent, it was almost as though he could see the future and knew exactly where each one was, whenever. His attacks were all proactive, and his blade never rested, whizzing around him smoothly, annihilating anything that came close enough.

Kane was impressed with how well Rui had honed his foundation. He did not use any fancy Squire-level sword techniques, but his basic passive application had reached a respectable stage in just a matter of half a year.

His movements were stable, and the edge of the blade was in perfect alignment with the direction of motion of the blade at every given moment, ensuring that there was not a single avenue for wastage of energy an ill-angled blade.

Rui's sword style at the moment had taken on the shape of a counter-offensive sword style, a fusion of offensive interception of attacks as well as evasive maneuvering. He engaged in just enough evasive maneuvering not to dodge and avoid attacks, but to put enough distance between himself and his opponent. The sword was generally not a close-quarters weapon and required a bit of distance at close range, thus Rui's footwork and maneuvering were targeted to provide adequate distance between him and his target. Thus despite moving away from the swarm he was always on the offensive.

"Unbelievable..." Kane murmured.

SLASH

Soon enough, the final rabbit had been felled. Rui glanced at him despite him being imperceptible.

"Come on, we have work to do," He casually remarked, walking past the death and destruction that he had just unleashed.

"Right..." Kane smiled wryly. "Were you hurt anywhere?"

"Nah," Rui shook his head. "Thankfully, these are primitive creatures. Creating predictive models on them was easy due to how uniformly simple their patterns are. They just attack straightforwardly, with

the same identical pace the second that they get a chance to. Predicting them and ensuring that they never touch me is not even a workout."

Kane could scarcely believe that Rui just described a feat that not even a party of three Martial Squires could accomplish before dying, in such a trivial manner. He realizes that when Rui had assured him that he was very well prepared to handle the threats of the dungeon... He was not exaggerating in the slightest whatsoever.

That was even more amazing. Kane had seen what Rui could do firsthand when he prepared for certain circumstances. He had taken down a powerful Martial Squire with a single attack on Vilun Island, something that was only restricted to powerful high-grade Martial Squires as far as such feats went. Furthermore, he rapidly defeated a high-grade Martial Squire at the time in head-on combat!

His ability to accomplish feats far beyond his physical limits never ceased to amaze Kane. His faith in Rui being able to fulfill their objective in the Shionel Dungeon only grew after witnessing his remarkable performance against a large herd of bloodfury rabbits.

"We still have tons of harvest to plunder," Rui smiled. Before pointing further down the city-sized space that was inhabited by even more herds of bloodfury rabbits and esoteric harvest. "There are a lot more monsters too, but as we've come to see, that should not be a problem.

Rui walked over to the bags in Kane's hands, reaching out for them, before fiddling with his ring.

FWOOP

"Woah!" Kane jerked his head back in surprise when the bag disappeared. "That's the first time I have ever seen one in action."

"They're extremely impractical cost and energy consumption-wise, but one cannot deny that they are also extremely useful," Rui smiled as all of the many bags of esoteric harvest disappeared into the ring one by one. "In our circumstances, they're golden."

"Hm," Kane nodded. "Alright, what now?"

"Let's continue," Rui replied. "We're going to plunder all of the remaining esoteric harvests on this floor."

It was a mad thing for a single Martial Squire of a team of two to say, but Kane could not even deny it when it came from Rui, he scratched his head. "Alright, but I am surprised that there are so many reserves of esoteric minerals and organic harvest left, honestly. Why wasn't this floor completely cleared before heading to another floor?"

"That's because the difficulty of completely clearing a floor increases the more progress you make, and the reason for that is the ratio between monsters and plunder increases the more progress you make. The monsters grow cornered and then group up in big herds that we ran into," Rui explained. "It's easier to just start on a new floor where the esoteric harvest reserves are more bountiful and ever-present."

"Easier?" Kane smiled wryly. "Less insanely difficult you mean."

Rui shrugged casually. "Same difference. Let's not waste any more time, we're clearing this entire floor of the remaining pockets of esoteric reserves before heading down deeper to the frontier floors."

Chapter 785: Incentive

"Mam, are you sure that you want to focus on the second floor today? It's not going to be easy clearing it at the moment. All the surviving bloodfury rabbits have grouped up densely rather than being more spread out than they were before. We would need to face hundreds, if not thousands, of bloodfury rabbits mam!"

There were several Martial Squires in a room listening to a conversation between their manager and their leader.

"It's a more attractive prospect than going down deeper floors at the moment," The red-haired woman calmly replied. "Floors become exceedingly harder to clear for adventurer parties when most of the floor is already cleared, that is why everyone is avoiding the second floor and going straight down to the tenth floor, correct?"

"Yes!" The grey-haired man whined, readjusting his spectacles. "There are more monsters herded together for less loot and plunder. It makes sense to go to deeper floors, that's what every adventurer party is doing!"

"It's because that is what every adventurer party and every individual adventurer is doing that makes it clearly the universally recognized superior option!" The man desperately explained.

"That is only true if you're trying to earn more money," She replied, unfazed by his vigor. "There is far greater competition in the deeper floors because no one is interested in defeating thousands of bloodfury rabbits to gain access to less plunder than you would gain access to if you only defeated a hundred monsters in the lower floors. If we go to floors nine, ten, or eleven; the three frontier floors, then we would also have to compete with other adventurers and adventurer parties!"

"With your caliber as an S-rank adventurer, you should have no problem!" The man insisted.

"Enough."

The air grew chill as she expressed a portion of her mental pressure in response to his constant nagging.

The man shivered as he straightened up, lowering his head reflexively, yet he managed to retain his voice. "S-Squire Fren, I am the liaising representative of Ridlen Mercurite Co. Your patron. Desist from engaging in this mental suppression. Our patron will be displeased to hear that you're not going to be pursuing avenues of greater yield."

Fren narrowed her eyes as she stared at him. Unfortunately, despite being a disgusting little worm in her eyes, he was right. The significant patronage that she had received from the Ridlen Mercurite Corporation was not something that she could simply ignore entirely.

"There are also other reasons why I wish to pursue the second floor of the Shionel Dungeon," She continued. "First, the floor has not yet been cleared. Any adventurer or party that successfully clears the floor will gain a significant amount of prestige and esteem, which will naturally funnel to our patron, given how exceedingly explicit his patronage of our party Saberstrike is. If we succeed clearing the floor, then it would be of benefit to Lord Ridlen."

She pointed to several places on her Martial attire that bore the trademark of the Ridlen Mercurite Corporation. It was definitely the case that any attention directed to them would inevitably attention directed to the Ridlen Corporation.

"Thirdly, I am a veteran beast hunter Martial Artist," She said with pride. "Our entire Saberstrike party is comprised of experts who have experience against beasts and monsters. Thus we will simply perform better and mitigate risks. Entering a dungeon is not a picnic, after all. I have plenty of sound reasons to go for the decision that I have chosen to go for. Please inform the president of the Ridlen Mercurite Corporation of that."

"Understood, Squire," The man bowed and readjusted his spectacles before leaving abruptly.

"Haaaah..." The spectating Martial Squires broke their silence.

"Tsk, why are they getting all up in our business?" A gargantuan man with brown hair tutted. "We don't tell them how to run a corporation, and they should stop telling us what to do after we enter a dungeon!"

"That arrogant man dares try to order us just because he gave us money and resources, I ought to kill him right now," A purple-haired woman coldly remarked.

"Calm down, Darbun, Seli," Fren replied, not losing her composure. "It's the way things work here, things do not work here as they do in our homeland the Republic of Gorteau. Money is the heaviest currency in this nation, and we knew that before we came here. But to think that they would be this bold is a little out of my expectations."

"Whatever it is, we managed to get our way this time, but it probably will be the last unless..." Another dark-haired Martial Squire remarked, drawing everybody's attention before continuing. "Unless we succeed in our claims and clear the second floor of the dungeon."

"Fuuu..." She narrowed her eyes, as she steeled her will. "We will."

The remaining Martial Squires shuddered as their hair stood up on end as a tsunami of pressure crashed into them.

None of them were particularly weak, in fact, they were all A-rank adventurers in the Shionel Confederation according to the Shionel Merchant Guild.

But the might of an S-rank adventurer, a grade-ten Martial Squire, exceeded even theirs.

"We will crush all those disgusting rabbits, and claim the glory that comes with clearing the dungeon," She sternly declared. "Failure, will not be tolerated. That goes for all of you as well as myself equally. That goes for us."

The four members of her Saberstrike Party nodded solemnly.

"If we're successful enough..." She continued. "We can break away from this patronage and obtain success going solo. That is my ultimate goal."

She gestured at the contract on the paper. "If we're able to hit pinnacle success without any patronage, then that is worth pursuing. At the very least we won't need to give squirming weakling like that man the time of the day."

That alone was worth pursuing this option for!

The other reasons she provided were definitely true, but aiming for their current level of prestige and success without patronage was the greatest incentive.

Chapter 786: Already

"Alright, it's time, let's get prepped," Squire Fren instructed. "I don't want to waste another second. The sooner we succeed, the better."

The other four Martial Squires nodded, exiting her room as they headed for their own to change into their Martial attires and adorn the necessary utilities and instruments.

She sighed as she began preparing herself. As a hunter-class Martial Artist, she was accustomed to carrying a lot of gear, equipment, and utilities along with her. She had a large set of tools that she could freely select to bring with her if she deemed them to be necessary.

Soon enough, the entirety of Party Saberstrike was ready. They quickly left the Adventurer exclusive hotel situated in the outer ring of the Adventurer Ring town before quickly heading inwards

"It never ceases to amaze me no matter how many times I look at it and feel it," One of her party members Seli said.

"Indeed," Another, Darbun, replied. "A dungeon spanning sixty kilometers from end to end is something I hadn't had the opportunity of laying my eyes on prior to coming to the Shionel Confederation, and thanks to it I have had the pleasure of entering it."

The pressure mounting on them grew increasingly high as they entered the inner ring and crossed the final barrier.

"Focus," Squire Fren sternly ordered. "Anything can happen once we enter the dungeon."

"Yes, leader," They replied to her as they grew increasingly wary.

The sensory jamming of the Shionel Dungeon unnerved every Martial Squires that entered it, for it was a circumstance that they were highly unaccustomed to. The sense that they had honed their entire career as Martial Artists had now been taken away from them, and they had been left to fight in the dark, literally, without it.

That was why despite their power and experience in the Squire Realm and with hunting beasts and monsters, none of them were comfortable or particularly confident, despite their determination. As things currently stood, a hoard of one thousand Squire-level monsters could be rushing toward them at the moment, and none of them would have any idea about it ahead of time.

The first floor was a bit of a safe space at the moment due to how extensively it had been cleared and occupied by human forces. The space was city-sized, and Martial Squires had already occupied a small portion of it, offering services to adventurers who were currently in the dungeon.

This way, these adventurers who were currently in the dungeon had no need to exit the entire dungeon and return back to the outer ring of the Adventurer Ring if they needed to purchase any goods or services.

Of course, they moved right past the first floor and headed down to the second floor, they had just entered and had no reason to take a break on the first floor.

They took their time, they could afford to run at top speed when their senses of what they were running into were extremely hampered.

STEP

Squire Fren paused the moment they arrived at the second floor.

"Take your stances, we might need to fight the second we walk in," She told them with a tense tone.

The five of them readied themselves physically and mentally before jumping into the second floor with metaphorical guns blazing.

Yet they were greeted by a sight that they had not expected.

"W-What is this?!" Squire Fren's eyes widened in shock as she beheld a puddle of blood that reached her ankles!

Blood, gore, and cleaved rabbit corpses as far as they could see greeted them.

"Hundreds... No thousands!" Squire Fren surveyed her surroundings. "Did a large S-rank party make it their mission to destroy the bloodfury rabbits on the second floor?"

"I almost feel sorry for the rabbits, they may be hideous monsters, but even that was not enough to prevent them from getting slaughtered," Squire Seli remarked. "A large number of Martial Squires must have beaten us to the punch."

"No..." Squire Darbun murmured.

"Hm? Squire Fren turned towards him. "What do you mean by that?"

"This was not done by multiple Martial Squires...!" Squire Darbun exclaimed. "I can tell based on the uniform similarities in the cuts that decapitated all these rabbits, this was all done by a single Martial Squire!"

"What?" Squire Fren's eyes widened.

Squire Darbun was a swordmaster Martial Artist who specialized in hunting beasts, he narrowed his eyes as he scrutinized the wounds inflicted on the bloodfury rabbit corpses.

"The force with which all these rabbits were killed is identical!" The man exclaimed. "These were all killed by a single Martial Squire!"

The remaining members of Party Saberstrike were shocked and speechless.

"All of these... by one Martial Squire?"

"Clearly, it's a veteran S-rank adventurer," Janeson, the fourth member of the party, stated. "Anything less is absolutely impossible."

"No, even for a grade-ten Martial Squire..." Squire Fren's voice trailed off as she considered the scene at her feet. She turned forward before rapidly heading off ahead.

"Wait for us!" They followed her hurriedly.

"There's more!" She murmured emphatically. "A single Martial Squire eradicated all these hundreds, no, thousands of bloodfury rabbits all by herself?"

She was strong herself. Strong enough to take on many Martial Squires and come out victorious. She was known for having defeated ten Martial Squires, albeit low-grade, in a fight back in her home nation after all. She was very confident that with the party that she had formed with her trusted comrades, they would be able to handle the bloodfury rabbits of the second floor. Their Martial Art and Martial Paths had great synergy, they had great synergy with each other as well as great trust. The bloodfury rabbits were decisively insufficient to take them out as long as they were careful and engaged in their strategic tactics.

However, would she be able to clearly annihilate so many all by herself, just running into a seemingly endless swarm of bloodfury rabbits?

"..." She picked up her pace she surged forward at a tremendous speed, leaving behind giant sonic booms in her wake.

('Bloodfury corpses everywhere...') Her eyes widened. ('Could it be that this floor is already...?')

Chapter 787: After-effects

That day, an odd tale spread across the Shionel Confederation.

The thankless task of clearing the second floor which had only a portion of its yield left for proportionally a lot more monsters than the frontier floors of the dungeon where most adventurers spent their time plundering loot, had been completed.

Not only that, word on the street was that it was completed by a single adventurer!

Yet, that wasn't the strangest occurrence.

It turned out that whoever completed this feat, did not even bother claiming credit for singlehandedly destroying a huge number of monsters all by themselves, harvested all of the remaining esoteric harvests on the floor, and had simply moved on without bothering any further about it.

The information came from a report from the party that discovered the state of the second floor; the Saberstrike party. One of the small proportion of adventurer parties that was led by an S-rank adventurer Martial Squire. The Saberstrike party is estimated to have arrived at the scene just fifteen minutes after the absurd feat was performed, based on the timelines estimation of the autopsies of the monsters.

The analyses of the expert hunters of the party were verified by expert consultants on media outlets, as well as the Shionel Adventurer Guild itself!

This news sent a ripple across the Shionel Confederation. Especially the news that the culprit responsible was not yet found.

"Culprit?" Squire Fren frowned as she read the official statement from the Shionel Merchant Guild just a few days later.

Two days ago, they had reported the clearing of the second floor of the dungeon, as well as everything knew about it. They had expected that one of the S-rank adventurers in the country presently would take credit for the clearing of the second floor of the Shionel Dungeon, yet, seventy-two hours later, the Shionel Adventurer Guild had not yet even indicated that the individual who had performed this feat or were even aware of the identity of the person.

"It's strange that they don't know yet, and it's strange that they're calling him a culprit rather than a hero," Squire Fren frowned.

"Honestly, it's strange that they don't know who it is yet. They surely would be able to find out from the tax paid, right?" Squire Seli asked.

Because the culprit had cleared the dungeon of the remaining large reserves of esoteric harvest, they would naturally be paying a huge amount of tax proportionally too, since the tax for being allowed to profit from the resources of another country was twenty percent of the yield.

Thus someone who was walking away with hundreds of large bags of harvest would be paying dozens of bags of harvest as tax, the Shionel Dungeon ought to instantly know who the person responsible is.

"The fact that they don't know despite that means..." Squire Fren's eyes widened. "That individual hasn't paid their tax to the Shionel Merchant Guild! That's why they are referring to that person as a culprit."

The other Martial Squires' eyebrows rose. That made definitely did make sense. It would also explain why the official statement of the Shionel Adventurer Guild is criminalizing that individual.

"To not abide by the international agreements, as well as the contract that they themselves signed," Squire Fren's eyebrow rose as she frowned. "It seems we're dealing with a very powerful troublemaker. The Shionel Merchant and Adventurer Guilds are not going to be happy with this outcome."

The guilds did not care for minor skirting, pursuing minor matters to the end took more capital than it was worth, however, it definitely did care about being scammed of tons of esoteric harvest and yield.

"How did this mysterious adventurer even manage to smuggle the esoteric harvest and yield out of the Shionel Dungeon?" Squire Darbun snorted. "It would surely be conspicuous,"

"There are several realistic possibilities," Squire Janeson remarked. "I'm sure that the Shionel Adventurer Guild will be aggressively pursuing this matter."

Squire Fren nodded. "I don't know who the culprit is, but that person will not be having an easy time, they may be a strong Martial Squire, but that does not mean that that alone would be enough to evade pursuit. Honestly, it's strange, why don't they just plunder the dungeon honestly and legally? They could gain fame and glory without having to hide."

None of them understood the motives of the perpetrator. This wasn't their fault, they couldn't imagine that the perpetrator's plans were so much grander than just the clearance of the second floor, and would likely end up becoming so disruptive, that publicizing their identity would be inviting danger to their life.

The word spread across town as all of the S-rank parties, including Party Saberstrike, declared that they had nothing to do with the incident, which only sparked more uproar. After all, the only people capable

of such a feat would be the various S-rankers in the Shionel Confederation. They had no intention of being accused of tax fraud that they did not commit in the first place, no amount of fame was worth that in the first place.

That meant that there was an unknown grade-ten Martial Squire in the Shionel Confederation that had cleared the second floor all by themselves. That was extremely strange since grade-ten Martial Squires were not a dime a dozen, they were extremely rare and inherently high-profile. Nations maintained a tab on all of them since they were all Senior candidates. How could such a person go unnoticed?

Squire Fren had initially half-wished that they had taken credit for it seeing as the real culprit wasn't coming forward, but after realizing how much trouble that would have gotten her, she had thanked her stars that she had initially decided to go with honesty and report everything, thinking that the person responsible would definitely take credit for such a feat.

The adventuring industry and sector began referring to the person that cleared the second floor as the Voider, for how there was no information surrounding this person, to refer to them whenever they was brought up in discussions, or in media.

Chapter 788: Bradt

"HAHAHA!" Kane laughed out loud. "They're calling you the VOIDER. This shit is hilarious!"

Kane leaned forward, caressing his ribs as he laughed his heart out.

"Very funny, Kane," Rui sighed with an amused smile as he let Kane engage in his typical teenage and juvenile humor. "I'm surprised I got an epithet at all. Seems that the gossip community for the dungeon and its adventurers has grown a lot over time."

"Well, of course," Kane shrugged. "I think you forget that we are naturally celebrities in this world, Rui."

"...Perhaps," Rui remarked. He didn't particularly care about that, never had, and never would.

"Though, maybe slaughtering every single monster in a large town-sized area was a bit too much, if you didn't wish to attract attention," Kane chuckled.

That day the two of them successfully bypassed the monsters with Kane's Void Step as planned and harvested all of the esoteric yields from the floor. Yet Rui had had Kane return from the dungeon while he decided to annihilate all the monsters anyway.

"I won't get that many chances to hone my skill without being detected huge proportion of Martial Squires on the floor in the future," Rui had told him back then. "I will push myself to kill all of them and gain more experience, you go back and book our rooms at a lowkey in the same way we did last time."

Kane had tried to convince him otherwise, but Rui had been quite adamant. That day later, Rui returned, having killed all of them.

"Valuable experience is a valuable experience, Kane," Rui informed them. "Right now we're behind the frontier of the dungeon, but that will not always remain the case, I intend for us to be far ahead of the curve, and this experience will only be useful then. The floors get harder the deeper we go, don't forget that."

Kane nodded. Now that Rui had proven his competencies, Kane could only agree that he wasn't in over his head, not that he had ever seen his friend be so. "Still, remind me why we didn't pay the taxes. Are we thieves?"

"For now," Rui straightforwardly admitted. "However, by the time we leave the Shionel Confederation, we will have given everybody what we owe them, and more. But we are contract violators for now."

"...You do know what you're doing, right?" Kane grumbled.

"Of course," Rui chuckled. "Several merchants of the Merchant, all of whom are bigshots, are our competitors in the esoteric supplier industries. The merchants of the Shionel Merchant Guild have complete access to the data in the Shionel Adventurer Guild's database. If we pay our taxes legally at the moment, they'll instantly know who we are, looking at the tax registration data. That's not good for us, because they'll come at us guns blazing when we inevitably disrupt the market and hurt their businesses."

"Didn't you say that they would inevitably find out?" Kane peered at him suspiciously.

"I did," Rui smiled. "I also said that I would need to 'buy' over some of 'them' to our sides with incentives and benefits like the map, did I not?"

"Right," Kane nodded, as he recalled Rui's conversation. Frankly, the plan was so sophisticated that he often forgot parts and bits of it, and needed Rui to keep reminding him about it. "Well, how do you intend to go about this?"

"I intend to talk to the right people, or rather, the right person," Rui replied casually.

"And who would that be?"

"The most powerful person in this nation, of course," Rui replied. "Bradt Patrick. The guildmaster of the Shionel Merchant Guild, and the leader of the libertarian faction."

"There are factions in the Shionel Confederation?" Kane frowned.

"There are factions everywhere, Kane," Rui chuckled, shaking his head slightly. "It is fundamental to the human race to be divided on any and everything. Naturally, there will be power blocs struggling for power, with different visions, policies, and ideals regarding how things ought to be run in the country. The Libertarian Faction is one of them, and the leader of the faction is Bradt Patrick, he's been the Guildmaster of the Shionel Merchant for quite some time now, and has been in the lead up until very recently."

"You mean..." Kane's eyes narrowed.

"The discovery and opening of the Shionel Dungeon," Rui replied. "That is the variable that has shaken his dominant position."

"How does that even work?" Kane frowned.

"It's complicated, but the position of Guildmaster is earned through an internal election of the Shionel Merchant Guild," Rui replied. "Thus in order to win the position, you need the most number of votes. This means you need to persuade the most number of voters, each of whom is a stakeholder and shareholder of the nation, each with their own businesses and conglomerates in the nation and out. Meaning that you need to demonstrate that giving you more power is beneficial to them. Do you know how Bradt Patrick managed to do that?"

"Not a clue," Kane replied, bored.

"It was by tying up interests of the various groups in question with his own field of business, one which is absolutely central to the concept of business; distribution and transport."

"You're telling me the oh-so-mighty merchant Guildmaster of the Merchant Guild runs a measly distribution service?" Kane looked thoroughly unimpressed.

Rui sighed with a troubled expression. "Don't look down on him. Distribution of goods and services from suppliers and service providers is a fundamentally necessary and important avenue of business. The Bradt Distribution Network is one of the most reliable, fastest, most efficient, and also the cheapest available services for the quality and reliability that it provides. Multi-national companies all over the east side of the continent have contracted the Bradt Distribution Network for serving as a very firm channel between their customers, clientele as well as the market in general, to a level that they could forget about achieving by themselves. He managed to tie up enough interests by leveraging his company to aid the stakeholders of the Shionel Merchant Guild, thereby buying their votes."

Chapter 789: Preparations

In a world where a network like the Internet had not taken hold yet, communication and distribution were vital and scarcer services for business and commerce. While communication technology did exist, it was not enough to facilitate large-scale mass communication over great distances. Satellite technology, that on Earth allowed for communication from one end of the planet, did not exist in this world. Thus all communication had significant bandwidth and range limitations.

In such circumstances, how was one supposed to conduct extensive international trade over a large number of foreign markets?

That was where the need for communication services allowed one to be able to connect to a market that is extremely distant without necessarily having to invest an impractically huge sum of capital into building one's own network and power base in an entirely different nation.

These services functioned by building a deeply entrenched communication network in the form of media promotion, showrooms, factory outlets as well as more informal manners of promotion.

The distribution services followed after building a demand for a certain brand or goods and services, allowing for a smooth transfer of funds and goods and services between the market and suppliers and service providers.

Bradt Patrick had come to dominate this sector with a gigantic communication and distribution empire oligopoly that was unrivaled within the market in the geographic vicinity of the Shionel Confederation. This was one of the reasons that he was able to see

"Ok, but what does that have to do with the Bradt Patrick and the Shionel Dungeon contributing to the loss of stability in his power?" Kane wondered, scratching his head in confusion.

"The reveal of the Shionel Dungeon has been good for everybody," Rui began saying. "Most sectors and industries benefitted from it, some more than others. And some, far more than others."

He turned towards Kane. "Guildmaster Patrick's business and trade falls into the category that hasn't benefitted as much as, say, raw esoteric suppliers and the manufacturing sector."

Of course, the increase in the sheer number of goods and services flowing inside the Shionel Confederation was definitely something that significantly benefitted his trade, however, not as significantly as the industries and sectors centered around the trade.

"Mercurite and Whitemane Powder, two of the esoteric substances ubiquitously found in the Shionel Dungeon, are valuable esoteric substances in the esoteric technology sector. The prior scarcity of it meant that the industries and sectors surrounding it were malnourished, but now that that is no longer true, these industries and sectors have undergone a great rebirth," Rui explained. "Unfortunately for Guildmaster Bradt, one of his political rivals runs a conglomerate centered around esoteric technology development and manufacture. He's dealing with a rival that has basically gotten a steroid injection or the equivalent Squire evolution breakthrough, and is growing 'stronger' every day."

"I see," Kane finally realized. "So Bradt Patrick, whose position used to be very secure and dominant, is now in trouble of losing his power due to the increasing growth in power of his rivals'?"

"Correct," Rui nodded. "In such circumstances, if I were him, I'd be looking for any variable that could break the current ongoing trends, or come to the next election, he could very lose his position as Guildmaster. He would do anything to avoid that."

Rui smiled as Kane's eyes widened when he fully understood Rui's intentions. And he had to admit, the plan was insane but could work. Though he had no idea about how Rui intended to execute that.

"Leave the details to me, like I said, I have this under control," Rui explained. "Remember what I said about the map?"

"Right," Kane nodded. "The Shionel Merchant Guild intends to commercialize the free real estate that would be left over after the Shionel Dungeon is completely cleared."

"Correct," Rui nodded. "And one of the many things needed to successfully embark on such an endeavor is a map, which I can provide... But also, it most certainly requires a highly robust distribution and communication network to establish the infrastructure and a flow of capital and goods and services from within and out."

"I see.." Kane understood. "So that means that Bradt Patrick will also be highly invested in ensuring that the commercialization of the cleared dungeon in the form of real estate is a successful endeavor."

"That's right," Rui nodded, grinning. "Now, I have to get to work, enough time has probably passed."

"Enough time for what?"

"For the search to have hit a dead-end," Rui explained.

"The investigation has only been around for a few days, correct?" Kane frowned.

"That's right, however, the prospects of finding the culprit become evidently clear at the beginning of the investigation," Rui explained. "There is a large window for the possible entry and exit of the culprit from their point of view, the suspect pool is large, and the means of smuggling the yields are unclear as

well. They basically have no way to narrow down the suspects. They cannot engage in search warrants for all possible Martial Squires because that would piss off all the nations partaking in the Shionel Dungeon exploration, and as annoying as the theft is, making an enemy out of all the surrounding nations that contribute to business and are markets and clients of the Shionel Confederation is an infinitely worse outcome that could go as far as causing a recession in the economy."

"Right..." Kane tried following all of that. "So you're saying that you intend to deal with them after it has become evidently clear to them that they have very little hope of catching you in the act?"

"Correct," Rui nodded. "With that out of the way, I only need to provide them with a strong incentive to cooperate with me, or rather, him. As long as I can do that, I've won. And the two of us can go as all-out as possible with the clearing of the Shionel Dungeon. I have a lot of preparations to make before I can go ahead with that, thus I'll probably be busy for a day or two."

Chapter 790: Conflict

"This is unacceptable!" A man banged his arm on the table as he skimmed through a few documents.

The noise drew the brief attention of many others, who glared at him for the disturbance.

"Order, Chairman Deacon," a calm deep voice suppressed the murmurs in the large hall, drawing everybody's attention to the source of the command.

The man stood at the center of the podium that overlooked the semi-circular array of chairs and tables, occupied by many people.

"The best we can do is look into the matter more extensively with our intelligence and Martial law enforcement agencies," The man replied with measured words.

His every word seemed to stick to all those who heard him. He had an aged appearance, yet it wasn't enough to hide the spark in his sharp eyes. The man's demeanor, grace, and grooming conveyed a magnetic gravitas that nearly lulled all those who beheld him into complying.

"Guildmaster Patrick," Deacon gritted his teeth and stared at him with a frustrated expression. "I'm afraid those measures are clearly insufficient! The progress reports and forensic and psych analyses are clear, there is no trail of evidence that can be used to make meaningful progress in finding out who the tax-evading culprit, who annihilated all the bloodfury rabbits of the second floor and plundered all of its loot, is. We need to do more!"

"And what exactly would you propose?" Bradt Patrick looked at him with casual boredom. "Would you rather we dispatch an even greater number of agents on the case? Dump even more resources? Do we continue chasing after this mysterious 'Voider' even if the expenses exceed what they stole from us? Are you suggesting we endeavor in making a loss?"

His eyes sharpened. "Is that a befitting suggestion from a member of the Shionel Merchant Guild?"

Deacon gritted his teeth as he stared at Bradt Patrick with a stern expression, reigning in his anger. In reality, they both knew perfectly well why the Guildmaster seemed to treat the issue as trivial, and why Chairman Deacon was taking it extremely seriously.

In reality, neither one of them gave a single damn about this particular instance of tax evasion. Yes, it was a violation of the adventurer contract that every Martial Squire signed to become an adventurer, and yes, the Shionel merchant Guild was being stolen from. However, the losses were trivial to the capital that the Shionel Merchant Guild had. In a vacuum, both of them would certainly be on the same when it came to catching the culprit who evaded the tax, however, nothing ever occurred in a vacuum.

Things always occurred within their surrounding circumstances. In these circumstances, chairman Deacon, Guildmaster Bradt's biggest rival, had plenty of reason to be concerned by this particular instance of tax evasion, and the fact that it was untrackable.

The fact that this individual could clear the second floor by themselves but also evade detection and could smuggle huge amounts of esoteric resource harvests without being detected was very troubling to him, who was in the esoteric mineral and organic supply industry. Based on the capabilities that the culprit had already revealed, it was entirely possible that a new force could take the supplier market of the esoteric organic and mineral ores, thereby reducing the growth that even someone like himself would experience, killing his greatest hope at becoming the guildmaster of the Shionel Merchant Guild.

Guildmaster Bradt Patrick, on the other hand, was in a trade that was largely unaffected by such an outcome, regardless of who monopolized or dominated the supplier market of raw esoteric ores, the

distribution and communication service sector would be almost entirely unaffected. Thus, he had no issue in letting a new variable that could potentially harm his biggest competitor take stal

Chairman Deacon, on the other hand, needed to ensure that this did not happen, and that necessarily began by identifying the threat. That was why he was most invested in the outcomes of the investigation by the intelligence and law enforcement agencies. The second that they identified the culprit, he would deploy the entirety of the closest local branch and have the culprit imprisoned regardless of the international pressure that he would suffer as a consequence.

Guildmaster Bradt had cleverly used the losing proposition of extensive investigation as a way to discredit Chairman Deacon's desire to pursue the investigation as aggressively as possible. The value of a merchant was measured by their ability to make money, after all, any merchant that could not make money was not even a merchant in their eyes, and any merchant that made losses was even worse.

That was the attack that Guildmaster Bradt Patrick was implicitly levying against him.

Still, he was not a member of the Shionel merchant Guild for nothing.

"The only way one can conclude that it is a losing proposition is if one only looks at the past, rather than the future," He sharply retorted. "Surely, the great Guildmaster of our Merchant Guild is not foolish enough to believe that a thief that has already stolen once, will never ever steal again."

Several murmurs could be heard in the hall. That was a valid point. What kind of thief engaged in this kind of heist only once? Especially when the end outcome was a perfect success?

"The future can be speculated, but never known," Guildmaster Bradt Patrick replied coldly. "What you are asking for is demanding this guild to allocate precious limited capital in an avenue that isn't confirmed to be needed, versus the myriad of issues that need investigation and are of national importance. Is this little thief more important than national security? Background checks and identity verification? International espionage? Are you truly saying that, Chairman Deacon?"

Chairman Deacon gritted his teeth, he had to admit, that was a really clever framing and retort. He didn't have too much of an avenue for being able to bulldoze his way through to increasing the investigative capital for this particular case of tax evasion.