

Martial Unity 831

Chapter 831: Rise

"Tsk," Tui tutted. ('You've made my job harder, Guildmaster Bradt.')

Guildmaster Bradt probably thought he was doing a favor to Rui and to himself, and frankly, given that he didn't know that Rui had infiltrated the Voidhunters, it made sense that he thought this way.

However, Rui couldn't even tell him to stop. Because even doing that would reveal that he was involved somehow. That would instantly make the four surviving martial Squires suspicious, two of whom were women.

That would be no different from revealing that he himself was the Voider. Thus his hands were tied in that regard.

('On top of that, Guildmaster Bradt cannot stop Chairman Deacon from placing a bounty on my head,') Rui knew that.

After all, placing a bounty on someone inside the dungeon was legal, thus there was no avenue for Guildmaster Bradt to fight this with the power of the state. On top of that, he could not use his own power to fight back publically. Since that would be no different from announcing that he was associated with the Voider.

That would mean that he was colluding with a criminal who had evaded tax at one point. That would be enough to launch a formal investigation against him, even if he was the Guildmaster. That would be damning.

He couldn't intervene from the shadows either, since his own private force could not possibly fight off all the people who accepted the bounty. The losses were also not worth the gains.

('All of this means that I'm kind on my own,') Rui's eyes narrowed.

Chairman Deacon indicated that he was considering publicizing the intelligence on the Voider. That would allow all the bounty hunters to track him more efficiently and with better awareness.

('That's not all,') Rui sighed. ('Chairman Deacon, Guildmaster Bradt. Those two are undoubtedly the two most powerful people in the Shionel Confederation. But they are not the only ones around, and they are not the only ones with power, and with interests that criss-cross with mine.')

There were many powerful merchants in the Shionel Confederation who were in the supplier industries that Esosale Suppliers was beginning to dominate. After all, the Shionel Merchant Guild was comprised of the top hundred most powerful and successful merchants. Number one was without a doubt Guildmaster Bradt, followed by Chairman Deacon, yet while quite far behind, the other ninety-eight were not weak.

Many of them were undoubtedly wishing death on the Voider for disrupting the market. While none of them were as powerful as Chairman Deacon, they too could make their efforts into stopping Rui under the wing of Chairman Deacon's publicized intelligence and the giant bounty that Chairman Deacon was inevitably going to be placed on his head.

('From the very start, the Voidhunters were merely the first step,') Rui realized in hindsight. ('There are greater measures that he can and will take.')

A large portion of the Shionel Merchant Guild would willingly lend their power to Chairman Deacon in the form of their privatized Martial Squires, and other resources.

That would grant Chairman Deacon a titanic amount of power at his disposal.

('However, that's not all,') Rui narrowed his eyes. ('It's not just the disenfranchised merchants that are on his side. He also has other stakeholders supporting him. But they're just not from the country.')

The merchants of the Shionel Merchant Guild were not the only ones who had a stake in the Shionel Dungeon. The many countries participating in the dungeon raid and plundering process were all stakeholders as well, who were no doubt pissed off by the Esosale Suppliers gaining access to a dominant share of the esoteric resources from the Shionel Merchant Guild would also most likely implicitly cooperate with Chairman Deacon.

The reason for this was that it was pretty clear that the Guildmaster Bradt was a staunch supporter and partner of Esosale Suppliers. This meant that they would naturally support his rival if they wanted to hamper Guildmaster Bradt.

So that meant that not only would Rui have to deal with the many freelancer bounty hunters that would arise from the bounty, but he would also have to deal with the pressure from the many disenfranchised and disgruntled merchants of the Shionel Merchants that were quite powerful and rich themselves.

On top of that, he would need to deal with the pressure that would emerge from the disgruntled nations that were each trying to carve out a portion of the Shionel Dungeon for themselves.

"Not gonna lie," Kane said after Rui reached home and explained everything. "That's insane."

"Yeah, it seems we'll have to be even more careful than we already are," Rui mentioned.

"That we already are?" Kane emphasized with a surprised expression on his face. "Is that even possible? I haven't been as careful in any of my past covert missions as I have been in this mission. The sheer number of things that we've gone through out of care is insane."

"True," Rui nodded. "Still, it's better safe than sorry. We'll have to revisit some of our established rules and protocols and refine them even more."

Rui needed to proceed with deep care and caution. "Honestly, avoiding already discovered floors with human presence is probably the only way to avoid all of this."

"Hm?" Kane tilted his head.

"I'm saying that existing and discovered floors are going to be infested by Martial Squires who are going to be looking for us," Rui calmly analyzed their circumstances. "While we could somehow still harvest. It's too dangerous. A single mishap and it's game over."

This was true. They had gone through so much to try and keep their identities as the Voider a secret in the operation with the Voidhunters. The difficulty was only keep getting higher and higher.

Rui didn't think that it was wise to keep subjecting themselves to compete with an increasingly hostile dungeon. They were not perfect, they would make a mistake at some point or the other.

"Thus, we need to rise above this competition and ensure they can't reach us."

Chapter 832: Farlo

"And now, please welcome Professor Farlo Vernint of the Shionel Universities of Humanities!"

A huge round of applause ensued as an elderly man walked onstage, waving at the large crowd that had gathered that day, before proceeding to shake the hand of the man who announced and introduced him. The two men then took a seat, waiting for the applause to die down before engaging in a dialogue.

"Professor Farlo is one of the foremost authorities on the happenings of the Shionel Dungeon and its impact on the economy. He has published many research papers on the matter, as well as the bestseller book on the topic called the Dungeon Chronicles," The host cheerfully explained, before turning back.

"Professor, thank you so much for coming on tonight."

"Thank you for having me," The professor smiled.

"Professor Farlo, we have a lot of exciting things to delve into," The host energetically began. "For one, it's been a year since the Shionel Dungeon was discovered and opened up. And rapidly soon after a supplier and consumer market quickly formed, surrounding the Shionel Dungeon and the untold resources that it could provide to the world. The sheer impact that it has had on our country is truly immense, is it not?"

"Well, I think immense is an understatement, Jimmy," The professor began with an interested tone. "Frankly, I think the impact that it has had is nothing short of historical and revolutionary. The Shionel Confederation is a state that was formed on the basis of commerce. Among all the nations in this section of the Panama Continent, our nation's population has the highest proportion of merchants and businessmen. We're the only nation whose international consumer market dwarfs our domestic market, and we're truly the only nation whose supplier market dwarfs our domestic consumer market. Meaning our economy truly runs on the countless merchants, businessmen, and entrepreneurs who offer goods or services. Commerce is the bloodline of our nation. That is why the discovery of the Shionel Dungeon,

which is nothing short of an oasis of untold resources, is a boon to our nation. The world wants what it can provide, and we answer the call and supply the demand."

"Indeed," The host replied. "You're truly correct in saying that it isn't short of revolutionary. The GDP per capita has increased by a factor of eight in the span of a single year! That's an absolutely unprecedented spike in the economy since the very founding of the Shionel Confederation!"

Professor Farlo nodded vigorously. "Furthermore, the GDP per capita has increased despite the population also spiking up due to mass immigration. The net annual GDP in the past twelve months has been the single highest recorded GDP in any continuous twelve-month period in the history of our great nation."

"Not only has the discovery of the Shionel Dungeon invigorated our economy, but it has invigorated many parts of our culture as well," The host remarked. "This is one particular consequence that I am personally familiar with our little weekly discussion events. There's so much to talk about that we have considered doubling the number of events we hold a week to get to all of it! The biggest and most exciting aspects of all of this are the countless Martial Squires that have taken part in the exploration and plunder of the Shionel Dungeon. Those are the most fun to talk about it."

That earned an approving cheer from the crowd that strongly agreed with that sentiment. The crowd had basically begun to treat the most prominent Martial Squires that raided the dungeon as superstar celebrities.

S-rank Martial Squires earned a lot of admiration and attention. It was to the degree that they had their own dedicated fanbases and fan clubs. For a brief period of time, Martial Squires had gained more prominence than higher Realms.

Of course, this was very temporary, once the dungeon was largely raided and plundered, the artificially boosted value and prominence of Martial Squires would soon dissipate, and things would return back to normal. Every generation of Martial Artists would experience having their value artificially boosted temporarily, and also experience Martial Artists of lower Realms experiencing the same thing.

"The cultural impact of the Shionel Dungeon on our nation has not been small," The good professor nodded. "If there's anything to be criticized about the impact of the Shionel Dungeon, it would be the fact that the impact of the Shionel Dungeon has had an adverse effect on our culture. That is one of the strongest critiques that critics leverage against the Shionel Dungeon."

"Oh, and what exactly is this so-called adverse effect?" Jimmy asked with curiosity.

"I should clarify that this isn't my stance or my personal view," The professor prefaced. "But to characterize their argument, it is that the discovery and open policy of the Shionel Dungeon has invited far too much foreign influence into our country. It is generally not desirable to have an abrupt and huge amount of immigrants hailing from different cultures and languages join and settle into the country in such an inorganic and unnatural fashion. It dilutes the original culture of the country and threatens to usurp the nation. Furthermore, it leads to a lot of cultural tension and even conflict. Multi-culturalism without a tying identity is generally undesirable. After all, the world is an example of that, and the world is at war."

"I see," Jimmy frowned. "That makes sense, yet, I feel as though that doesn't apply to a nation like the Shionel Confederation."

"I agree," The professor nodded. "Any concerns regarding culture are, in my opinion, misplaced. The Shionel Confederation was not born out of a population with a united culture. If anything, the original constituents of the originally established Shionel settlement were vastly more diverse than the current state of the Shionel Confederation. Yet there was one force and also one identity that was strong enough to unite them despite that. Do you know what that is?"

Jimmy smiled knowingly. "Money. They were merchants."

"Exactly!" The professor grew more animated. "Their identities as merchants, as people who employed resources, capital, and manpower to produce demanded goods and services to earn a profit is the fundamental identity that united them together to create a nation!"

Chapter 833: Culture

The original Shionel settlement was nothing more than an attempt at earning more money. It was difficult for individual merchants, entrepreneurs, and skilled laborers to be able to consistently receive a consistent demand for their goods and services and also be remunerated in a commensurate manner in that era and region.

The reason for this was that markets were nowhere near as sophisticated as they were today. There were no regulations or enforcement. Currency as a concept was still immature and in its infancy and the barter system was still in place for the most part. Furthermore, the fragmented groups were too small to have any meaningful currency that could be used universally within a certain geographic region, or could at least be exchanged for other currency.

This was why the many struggling merchants and laborers gathered together in a large enough settlement to form the original Shionel settlement. Their sole aim was to unite their interests in one big interest group comprising thousands of merchants, entrepreneurs, and laborers, and negotiate and bargain as a larger and more powerful group that is better able to secure their interests and access the existing demand for goods and services they were capable of providing.

"In short, money was the unifying factor. Not shared culture or values. The only shared value is money. Money can transcend language, cultural, biological, and perhaps even species differences!" The professor grew increasingly excited. "The only way for the Shionel Confederation could ever lose its 'culture' is if the state stops revolving around money. And that is why I respectfully disagree with my colleagues who are skeptical and or against the extensive commercialization of the Shionel Dungeon."

This earned an applause of approval from the audience. It seemed that his sentiment was quite attractive.

"I see," Jimmy nodded. "That does make a lot of sense, I have to admit. It doesn't matter what the dominant culture is, so long as the highest value is money. However, what we do care about is who the dominant adventurers are, and also who the dominant market players are. The Shionel Confederation has become a melting pot for many powerful forces that are competing to carve out a share in the Shionel Dungeon. It's been exciting watching different groups bring out their best Martial Squires while also doing their very best to buy the best Martial Squires and parties to plunder the dungeon for them. What are your thoughts on that?"

"Oh, it's most certainly been quite fascinating to study the supplier market patterns of the Shionel Confederation in the past year. A lot of it has been more or less in line with my predictions. Deacon Industries completely dominated a lion's share of each floor's yield, making him the strongest force in the supplier market. There are tons of sectors and industries that are consumers of the raw esoteric resource supplier industries, this directly gives Deacon Industries a giant amount of influence over all of them, which Chairman Deacon has surely put to great use in many ways. He was who I bet as the ultimate winning of the Shionel Dungeon, given that his stronghold over the market had been unbreakable for an entire year."

"'Had been'," Jimmy offered him a wry smile. "Not anymore it seems."

"Not anymore, no," The professor laughed good-heartedly. "Or, to be more precise, someone has successfully broken his dominance on shares of the yield of the twelfth floor of the Shionel Dungeon. It has been all the buzz around town recently. The mysterious, unknown, and anonymously created and registered Esosale Suppliers that had very recently begun to be aggressively promoted by the Bradt Distribution Services have taken everyone by surprise. Frankly, for all my knowledge and experience, I had never predicted something like this happening even in my wildest dream, I have to admit. A random force appearing out of nowhere and dethroning the titan from its throne and suddenly supplying massive amounts of esoteric resource yields that had been disappearing from the twelfth floor? Such a thing sounds like a tale from a fictional novel, rather than a real event. Yet I have to admit that I was quite excited at this revelation as well. The world is full of surprises, without a doubt."

"The sheer number of theories, speculations, and conjectures that have been flying around leave my head spinning. I'm unable to tell what is true, and what isn't," Jimmy sighed. "I was hoping you could shed some light on this strange phenomenon."

"Haha, I can understand why it is so confusing," Jimmy laughed goodheartedly. "Unfortunately, it is a very confusing outcome frankly. Even I'm not entirely certain of my theories. But I can share with you some of my insights, hypotheses, and suspicions, if that's alright."

Jimmy nodded vigorously. "Most certainly,"

It was actually the main reason that the professor had been invited in the first place, instead of popular S-rank parties or other more flashy guests. The Esosale Supplier phenomenon was so interesting and fascinating to literally everybody, that it was worth bringing on a more mundane and boring yet highly knowledgeable guest to shed some light on the matter.

"There's a lot of information to sort out here, so we might jump around a bit," The professor warned lightly. "Chronologically, the first outlying event was the clearance of the second floor anonymously, and the tax evasion. That was the first interesting event that gained temporary traction, but it was not all that significant since the second floor was a dead floor. However, the next shocking event was the drastic change in policies from Guildmaster Bradt that allowed for anonymity in a lot of areas in the Shionel Confederation that were previously impossible. This was a drastic amendment to protocols that were not on the agenda of matters that Guildmaster Bradt had based his campaign. It frankly still doesn't make a lot of sense to us, but it could make sense under the hypothesis that the amendment was to allow for the anonymous creation and registration of Esosale Suppliers that Guildmaster Bradt aggressively promoted after."

Chapter 834: Know

The lower echelons of society generally lacked the information that the highest echelons of society possessed. This was a result of lacking authority to access classified information or lacking means to access information that only came with being rich and powerful. Thus, they were far more lacking in knowledge that was common and basic knowledge amongst the upper echelons.

In the halls of the Shionel Merchant Guild, the situation was mostly clear to all of the Cabinet Merchants. Chairman Deacon was Guildmaster Bradt's greatest rival and had been undergoing massive amounts of growth that allowed him to shake the otherwise rock-solid political stronghold that Guildmaster Bradt had created by securing the interests and benefits of a majority of the voters.

They had absolutely no misconceptions about why the Guildmaster had passed the bill, in hindsight. It was obvious that the passing of the bill had something to do with the anonymous creation and registration of Esosale Suppliers. It was no coincidence that this empty company that he aggressively promoted somehow magically seemed to gain access to huge amounts of resource yields that were then sold to the consumer market and was formed immediately after the bill he passed regarding the changes in protocols for identity registration and verification. There was simply none of them who bought this highly mysterious company that Guildmaster Bradt was aggressively promoting came right after he made it easier for everyone to be connected.

It was clear to the Cabinet Merchants of the Shionel Merchant Guild that Esosale Suppliers was the reason that Guildmaster Bradt had passed that bill. Esosale Suppliers was Guildmaster Bradt's solution to hampering the growth of Chairman Deacon.

The only thing that was unclear to the Cabinet Merchants was the relationship between Guildmaster Bradt and Esosale Suppliers.

Some thought that Esosale Suppliers was created by Guildmaster Bradt who had employed the mysterious force that was able to harvest huge amounts of esoteric yield from the Shionel Dungeon. Others thought that it was created by an entity that had developed an incredibly revolutionary way of extracting resources from the Shionel Dungeon, but did not want to be targeted.

Regardless, even this was completely unknown to the public. An overwhelming majority of people had not worked out the connection between Esosale Suppliers and the popularly-dubbed Voider that was suspected to be the reason for the disappearance of the esoteric yields on the twelfth floor.

"And so, I believe that this is most likely a move from Guildmaster Bradt who is eager to break Deacon Industries' dominance in the supplier market. It would explain why Chairman Deacon created the Voidhunters team that has been said to have been largely wiped out in the dungeon by some group of assassins targeting them," Professor Farlo continued, after explaining everything, absorbed in his own words. "Although we don't have proof that the Voider, the individual responsible for mysteriously clearing the second floor is actually responsible for the disappearance of esoteric resources on the twelfth floor if Chairman Deacon believes it, then that probably means that he has some information that we don't have."

"Incredible!" Jimmy exclaimed. "That almost sounds like a crazy conspiracy theory, but it makes a lot of sense."

"In this case, unless we truly are missing a lot of information or are operating on misinformation, I think probably is not too far from the truth. The truth about Esosale Suppliers is most likely deeper than we can all imagine. There are likely powerful forces conspiring and fighting for political power, right before our very eyes, disguised in plain sight, and we're simply unable to see the truth."

This was shocking to hear to the crowd that what they had simply treated as an exciting oddity and mystery was actually a deep political powerplay and conspiracy between the most powerful political leaders fighting for power through the Shionel market.

"That is truly fascinating and incredibly terrifying to hear," Jimmy laughed as he remarked. "Honestly, I don't even know if I'll be able to sleep at night. To think that the Voider has gone from being a relatively momentary gossip story to potentially being the key to victory in a political battle that will change the Shionel Confederation."

"It most certainly will. Whoever emerges as a victor at the end of this debacle will most likely remain unchallenged for a very long time. Thus neither side is willing to cede easily. Chairman Deacon may have suffered a bad setback with his preliminary Voidhunter operation. But realistically, that doesn't matter. The death of a dozen Martial Squires is barely a sting to such titans. That team was something put together on extremely short notice. The two of them can leverage their massive economic capital to pull in a much greater number of Martial Squires. I imagine you can expect a storm to occur in the Shionel Confederation and in the dungeon as well."

This raised waves of murmurs from the crowds. Many of them were excited to see the two political giants duke it out and to see which one of them comes out on top. The scale of this event was so large and beyond that it didn't have too much to do with ordinary citizens of the Shionel Confederation like themselves. Thus they could, to some, extent regard the situation with a certain level of detachment.

"Of course," The professor followed up. "That's just a theory. I don't have any proof that this is the case. It could be the case that I'm reading too deeply into certain things or not reading deep enough into other things. I want to be clear that none of this is fact."

It didn't matter what he followed up with. The crowd was too excited with the information that he had provided to let it go this early and judge it objectively. They weren't qualified to do such a thing in the first place, and would just simply put their trust in his thoughts given that he's an academic, and cheered on as they excited themselves on such a fascinating conspiracy theory.

Chapter 835: Bounty

Soon enough, as Rui predicted, a bombshell dropped in the Shionel Confederation. Deacon Industries published an announcement in their media outlets and posted posters, and Chairman Deacon himself held a public press conference on the issue.

Deacon Industries was issuing a public bounty on the Voider for ten million Shionel gold coins. This sum of money shook the nation, ten million gold coins was an astronomic sum of money to kill a single Martial Squire. This sum of money was unprecedented as a bounty for a Martial Squire.

In fact, as far as everyone could tell, never in the history of the Age of Martial Art had a Martial Squire had such a gigantic bounty placed on their head. Such an enormous sum of gold was not trivial even for the mighty powerhouse that Deacon Industries was.

Bounties in the Shionel Confederation were usually placed on criminals by the state as a way to mobilize freelancer Martial Artists into aiding law enforcement. The reason they were otherwise illegal was that they violated the law and constituted conspiracy to murder and assault, and would normally instantly land Chairman Deacon in prison and disbarred from the Shionel Merchant Guild.

However, this was only under normal circumstances. The Shionel Dungeon was not subject to these constraints and restrictions, mostly because no law could be enforced within the Shionel Dungeon.

Chairman Deacon was exploiting that loophole to the absolute fullest. Killing the Voider inside the Shionel Dungeon was legal, and now would fetch one ten million gold coins.

Of course, things weren't as simple as that. For one, how did one verify that the individual, or individuals that were killed were the Voider?

Such a thing was harder to gauge as their identity was unknown. Regardless, Deacon Industries had laid many conditions that would go into identifying whether the individual was actually the Voider, or not.

For one, each bounty hunter was encouraged to purchase a recording device and record the individual suspected to be the Voider for whatever reason. Bounty hunters were also encouraged to procure the corpse or corpses and give it to Deacon industries that would analyze whether or not they were the Voider.

The way to do this would be to analyze their means of harvesting, the identity of the corpse, the existing harvested yield, etc. The Voider had a very unique way of doing things when it came to the extraction of esoteric resource deposits, storage, and transport. These could be analyzed and could be used to verify this individual possessed the remarkable ability to harvest at titanic rates that the Voider was confirmed to have.

This sounded a bit flimsy and not concrete at all, the conditions were subjective. However, the reward was absurd. The Shionel currency was weighted very heavily, each gold coin meant a lot when converted to most other currencies. Ten million Shionel golds were nothing short of a small fortune.

Furthermore, if this bounty was made by a smaller and less credible party, it wouldn't have garnered much trust at all. However, this was the Deacon Industries. On top of all of that, they had made such a big and loud show about it attracting attention internationally, that they did not dare intend on betraying any bounty hunter that succeeded!

Credibility, reliability, and history were some of the more intangible variables, yet also some of the most important variables that merchants and businesses needed to pay attention to. In fact, these were variables that made or broke success.

It wasn't because of moral reasons that companies worked hard to maintain honest operations, it was purely because companies that broke their word, deceived third parties, and generally engaged in shady operations were avoided like the plague. There were extremely practical reasons to ensure that one's transactions and operations were clean.

In that regard, Deacon Industries was extremely rigorous and solid. Its sheer credibility and reliability were huge reasons that it was able to reach the level that it had reached. If Deacon Industries dared to blatantly cheat bounty hunters and break their word, the decades that had gone into building up its pristine credibility and reputation would be utterly annihilated overnight. Prospective third-party clients, customers, and business partners would seriously reconsider the wisdom of collaborating with a company that unhesitatingly broke its word despite making such a big fuss about it and announcing it to the world.

Deacon Industries would rather lose ten million gold coins than their credibility and reputation. Losing the latter would cause far more damage in the long run, as would letting Rui run around. That was why Chairman Deacon did not hesitate to go big from the very get-go and offer a huge sum of money as a bounty.

That was why the general sentiment and response to the bounty was quite positive, no one believed that this was a scam. A huge number of Martial Squires expressed interest and eagerness to hunt the Voider. A bounty meant that they could still get paid if they succeeded, and they didn't need to abide by orders from Deacon Industries. As long as they succeeded, they would get a huge bounty in return.

On top of all of that, Deacon Industries was providing full access to all of its intelligence surrounding the Voider, which was a huge help, since it allowed all the bounty hunters to gain a basic understanding of the Voider and made it likelier that they would catch the Voider. Without the information, they would be running blind and would have a much harder time catching even basic information about him.

The intelligence of Deacon Industries would also be updated with all information on the Voider available, meaning any time any progress was made. That progress would also greatly aid Martial Squires in the future allowing them to act on more updated information.

The sheer number of bounty hunters acting with this information made people quite optimistic that the Voider would eventually be hunted.

Soon enough, huge numbers of Martial Squires registered as bounty hunters in large droves, looking to be the ones to catch the Voider.

Chapter 836: Trap

"Hmmm," Rui hummed as he analyzed the latest happenings. "This is rough,"

"Are we screwed?" Kane sighed. "It was a good run while it lasted."

"Relax, we're not screwed," Rui replied. "However, we can forget about trying to explore already discovered floors. From here on out, we should avoid it altogether. We always planned to reach this stage, but perhaps we'll have to accelerate the process. There are too many threats around us. I don't feel comfortable with all of this."

He got up, heading for the door. "I'll be back,"

"Where are you headed?" Kane asked.

"I'll register as a bounty hunter," Rui replied. "Get prepped, we're going dungeon raiding soon enough."

Rui headed towards Deacon Industries where the basic registration process was happening. What surprised Rui when he got there was how large the crowd was.

('What the...') He frowned as he got in line. ('Why on Earth are so many people joining? Surely most of these adventurers have other arrangements. Patrons, contracts, places of employment... How can they possibly also take up something as time-consuming as bounty-hunting when'-)

His thoughts halted when he realized the answer. ('It's because it's an open-ended bounty that they can afford to register. Simply registering is not problematic since it does not convey any burdens or responsibilities. It simply allows them to access the intelligence that Deacon Industries is offering to bounty hunters and allows Deacon Industries to keep score on the number of Martial Squire registering as bounty hunters for this mission.')

What that meant was that even if they did not find the Voider, or even try to, they would still have no problems, however, if they did find and kill him, then they could immediately provide his corpse to Deacon Industries without any issues.

Furthermore, they could access information on his more easily too. Furthermore, the non-committal nature of the registration meant that there was no issue with spending as much or as little time whenever they wanted.

It was quite convenient and there was no harm in registering.

('Hm, quite the good strategy on Deacon's part,') Rui mused with mixed feelings as he navigated the crowd.

He only intended to register to be able to access the investigative reports on himself, and nothing else.

He was aware that he was probably giving himself away to a certain extent since Chairman Deacon could be sure that the Voider would register to keep tabs on his own investigation, but he had decided that this trade-off was worth it.

Even if Chairman Deacon became more certain that the Voider was among this group, the number of Martial Squires that had already registered and would continue to register would make the suspect pool absurdly large and impractical. It was no different from having no clues whatsoever.

Further, Chairman Deacon would also have to consider the possibility that the Voider was accessing information through an associated third party, which further made his job harder.

Ultimately, the negatives were not worth the positives.

However, Rui was not naive enough to think that there was no scheme in any of this. While the world might simply think Chairman Deacon was simply trying to be good-hearted and help the Martial Squires. Rui was shrewd enough to make out how Chairman Deacon could exploit the fact that the Voider would be paying attention to the investigation for manipulation.

There were ways that he could potentially manipulate the Voider by planting false information that would cause the Voider to act a certain way, or choose to make a certain decision that Chairman Deacon would be on the lookout for.

For instance, if Chairman Deacon managed to convince the Voider that they had managed to develop a way that allowed them to narrow down the Voider's positions through his Martial attire marked with some esoteric substance, then the Voider, if convinced, would naturally do his best to dispose of it and procure an alternative perhaps.

In that case, Chairman Deacon could potentially notice any suspicious movements. Worst case scenario, if he kept tabs on all the Martial Squires, he might just be able to catch someone who would act exactly as they would if they were afraid of getting caught.

Essentially, Chairman Deacon was also using this bounty to get into the mind of the Voider and manipulate him to reveal himself using elaborate deception, traps, and even misinformation.

Rui was pretty sure that this was the true intention of Chairman Deacon.

Still, he wasn't fazed. ('Neat, but that's not going to work on me.')

Had it been any other Martial Squire, they would not be able to avoid falling into his trap and eventually revealing themselves. But Rui was probably the only Martial Squire shrewd enough to not only understand the true purpose of the publicized intelligence but also capable enough to avoid the traps and pitfalls that came with that.

('All he needs is a single slip-up to accelerate his progress in his investigation,') Rui narrowed his eyes as he eventually got to the registration part. ('We definitely need to discover our own floors and harvest esoteric resource deposits there. No amount of scheming will be able to get us if we're there where they can't reach us.')

Every time a new floor was discovered, the Martial Squires who discovered it informed the Shionel Adventurer Guild which rewarded them extremely handsomely for the discovery. This was to ensure that no Martial Squire kept new floors a secret when they discovered it.

Thankfully, Rui didn't give a damn about the measly reward compared to the esoteric plunders of a whole floor. Thus, he intended to keep it a secret.

When the floors that he would discover would naturally be discovered by other Martial Squires, they would only find empty floors that were infested with monsters but not a single deposit of esoteric resources left.

There was no amount of scheming that would be able to make up for such a drastic gap in explorative and navigation capability, and Rui intended to show Chairman Deacon that he did not stand a chance.

Chapter 837: Future

"Ready?" Rui asked.

"Yep, this should be entirely very fun," Kane sighed.

"Cheer up," Rui told him. "We're going to see new sights."

The two of them had already been in Void Step together for quite a while now. Yet it was only after they entered the dungeon that they stopped the technique. Inside the dungeon, nobody could sense them beyond a certain range anyway, thus it was better to let Kane save his stamina and use it when it was necessary, like when they were harvesting resources.

"We're going to ignore all of the established paths to the existing floors right?" Kane asked.

"Yep, we're going to randomly explore tunnels until we hit a new floor, or die trying!" Rui grew a little excited, exclaiming emphatically.

"How about trying another day?" Kane asked blandly. "I'd rather fail than die trying to succeed like, you know, a sane person."

The two of them bickered as they randomly picked a large tunnel at a random part of the entry into the dungeon before following it down merrily.

"Doesn't this feel so much better though?" Rui asked Kane at some point while still being extremely vigilant of their surroundings. If he got careless, they could very easily die from some lethal attack from a monster. If they got hit by a taipan, then they were dead for sure. "Don't you enjoy the pure and sheer freedom that comes with choosing your own path and looking for a new destination?"

"It would be relaxing if it weren't for the fact that I'm basically blind to my Martial Squire standards standing in probably the most dangerous environment anywhere within ten thousand kilometers," Kane explained. "It's a shame I can't be as nearly at ease as you are. Hell forget ease, you're basically beaming right now."

"Yeah," Rui nodded with a smile. "Because this rough adventure has entirely been of my own creation thus far, no missions, no Martial Union, no clientele. It's fun to do things for your own self than for others."

"I suppose I can see that," Kane shrugged. "I'm pretty far away from the Arrancar Family, so I suppose that is definitely a plus. Furthermore, I have to admit, helping you set off bombs in the Shionel Confederation has been pretty exciting. More exciting than most things that have happened in my life."

Rui gave Kane a knowing glance.

Kane had spent most of his life trapped by the Arrancar family because of the dramatic talent for Martial Art and combat he had demonstrated even when he was a toddler. It had caused him to develop a deep hatred for his family, and a deep yearning to escape them and go far away from them in the world.

It had been to the point that even getting into the Martial Academy had been one of the best things that had happened to him. Rui was sure that this was the first time he had even gone this out of his way for none other than himself.

"Heh, maybe you can stay here," Rui shrugged. "Build a new life here far away from your family."

"Maybe," Kane replied nonchalantly. "But they'd probably find me here as well. If I want them to not find me. I need to erase myself from their sights entirely. But I'm not strong enough to do that, for now."

Kane's family was a powerful Martial Family comprising many Martial Artists of all Realms, barring the sole Martial Sage of the family. The only reason he was able to stay away from them from the moment was the protection that came from his political affiliation.

The second that he left the country forever, that protection was gone. The Lightning Martial Sect would not help a Martial Artist that was not going to aid their cause and even leave the country forever.

"Not strong enough you say," Rui echoed his words. "Then for how long do you intend to wait?"

Kane considered his thoughts. "I think if I even break through to Martial Senior, I'll be able to use Void Step to such a level that they won't be able to track me."

"Hm," Rui considered the matter.

The problem was that both of them knew too little of what Martial Artists of higher Realms were capable of. Rui had seen three Martial Seniors fight, but that did not mean he knew that Martial Seniors in general were capable of. Nor did that mean he knew what Martial Masters and above were capable of. These mighty beings were so beyond his reach that he genuinely could not fathom what they could do.

Thus, as much as he would like to have affirmed the soundness of Kane's plan, he couldn't do so, not in good faith.

"There are several possibilities," Kane explained to Rui. "I could either stick with the Lightning Sect forever under their protection. I could grow stronger to be able to resist the Arrancar Family. I could gain the patronage of a powerful political force instead of the Lightning Sect, or I could polish my covert capabilities as well as my stealth, and plan to leave the Shionel Confederation and set out to the other side of the continent. Far away from their sphere of influence. Frankly, I think the last plan has the highest probability of success when you consider the difficulty of execution, time period, and margin of error."

"You've thought really this through deeply, haven't you?" Rui remarked, impressed at the level of thought that Kane had given it.

"Well, yeah, I kind of have to. It is my future and all," Kane shrugged. "I'm not as smart as you, but I'm smart enough to know that if I don't plan this out carefully and take into account all variables, things could end extremely badly for me forever."

"That's quite prudent of you," Rui replied approvingly. "If you need any help with anything, you can definitely be sure to reach out to me and ask me for any help that you may need."

Chapter 838: Corpse

The two of them had been walking for quite some time. There was no point in sprinting when they didn't have a destination yet. Furthermore, Rui needed time to scan his surroundings and explore direction along all three hundred and sixty degrees around himself. He didn't bother reading all the space curvature all around him within a certain radius. Instead, he focused all of his reading in one particular direction at any given moment, sweeping across his surroundings across time by individually scanning each direction to the maximum distance, replicating Radar mechanics.

Thus he needed to take his time, if they traveled too fast, then he wouldn't thoroughly be able to sweep his surroundings. The two of them chatted a bit more about lighter topics before Rui paused, abruptly turning his head forward.

"What happened?" Kane grew more wary and vigilant. "Is it a monster?"

"Not exactly," Rui murmured. "I think I just happened across something interesting. Let's check it out."

He began picking up the pace heading towards the strange stimulus he felt in his sensory sweep.

It wasn't long before he reached it. He narrowed his eyes, as his expression grew more grim.

Kane quickly caught up as well, his eyes widened as he too beheld what Rui had sensed. "Is that a human?"

Rui nodded. "A corpse, but..."

He didn't even need to complete his words. The corpse had a sickly black color to it, which immediately suggested poison or venom to Rui. That wasn't what was shocking about this corpse to Rui, however.

"This man... was a normal human being, when he was alive," Rui's expression under his mask morphed into one of shock.

This should have been entirely impossible!

Humans were unable to enter the inner ring of the Adventurer Ring town due to the sheer pressure that the dungeon exerted on their psyches. That meant there was no way for humans to enter the Shionel Dungeon without suffering traumatizing and crippling fear and stress. Many would even be rendered unconscious, while many would lose their sanity.

There were very few humans that could withstand the pressure of the Squire Realm. The old blacksmith that Rui had met in the town of Hajin, as well as some remarkable men in the Shionel Confederation were probably the only exceptions.

The fact that a human being had made it so deep into the Shionel Dungeon was something that Rui was unable to wrap his head around.

Was this human being one such remarkable person who possessed otherworldly mental fortitude?

"A normal human being?" Kane gasped, before cringing at the disgusting rotting odor while he knelt down to take a good look at the corpse. "You're right, these remaining scraps of clothes are not those of the Martial attire of a Martial Artist."

Kane keenly noticed that the surviving scraps covering the corpse were not those of a Martial Squire. Martial Squire attire was made out of very special esoteric fabrics that could at the very least survive their power, even if they could not offer any protection to the wearer.

"Not only that," Rui murmured. "This body is most certainly not that of a Martial Squire. It's not a Martial body, it's that of a normal human."

He grabbed a rock, kicking it at the dead skin of the corpse. The motion immediately opened up a tear in the skin.

"Even a dead Martial Squire's body would not be that fragile," he remarked with narrowed eyes. "On top of that, observe the muscle tone and definition and body fat to weight percentage, it deviates from Martial Squires. This person has never undergone the equivalent of the Foundation Stage of the Martial Academy. In fact, this person is most certainly not a fighter in any way."

"That makes sense," Kane nodded. "That makes this discovery even more bizarre. How on Earth did a non-combatant human enter the Shionel Dungeon so deeply, and even die here?"

That was the question that begged itself to both of them. Neither of them could understand how such a thing came to be.

"This mystery isn't exactly relevant to us, but it's a shame that we cannot find out anything about this person," Kane sighed.

"That's not true," Rui refuted him as he keenly scrutinized the body. "This person most likely did not live in the heart of the Shionel Confederation, and most likely was part of the lowest class of the state."

"How can you possibly figure that out?" Kane frowned.

Rui pointed to a scar on the man's neck. "He was cut quite deeply on his neck, but the scar still remains, furthermore the wound was professionally stitched and healed naturally from the looks of it. That meant that there was no usage of potions during the treatment, which automatically puts a bar on the economic class this person could have been a part of and also eliminates the possibility of being a resident of most places in the Shionel Dungeon, given how widespread the application of potions in medicine is."

He felt the fabric of the remaining scraps with his fingers. "Simple cotton. That's not proof of anything, but still, it's frankly hard to fathom what a person like this would be doing anywhere near the Shionel Dungeon, let alone go anywhere inside it, let alone go this deep."

"What else can you deduce from this corpse?" Kane asked with interest.

"Based on the degree of coagulation and rotting of blood I'd say it probably hasn't been more than a few days since death," Rui pointed at the tear in the skin that he had created half a minute ago, before turning to the arms of the corpse. "The biceps and triceps are much more underdeveloped compared to the muscles of the forearm. That indicates a profession, job, or lifestyle that involved rigorous use of the fingers and hands, but not of the entire arm. Most likely no manual labor, but a manual skilled profession. This is also further supported by the fact that the nails on his fingers are uniform while the toenails are messier."

Chapter 839: Shock

He lifted the corpse up briefly, paying attention to the hips. "An anterior pelvic tilt, which generally implies an unhealthy amount of time continuously spent in a seated position."

He opened up the mouth of the corpse glancing inside. "A mouth-breather with enlarged adenoids and constricted airways."

"Regular grooming of facial based on the inclination of hair despite clearly not being groomed recently."

"Deep calluses on the sole of the foot, indicating a lot of time spent barefooted despite rough environments."

"Low of minute old scars on the finger, most likely from repetitive mistakes caused by using small, precise but sharp tools."

"Long-time user of spectacles based on the subtle marks on the nose, most likely broken and/or lost in his time in the dungeon."

"Married based on the ring indentation on his ring finger with a lighter skin tone. But more importantly, that eliminates several possible geographic origins of such a person."

"Lost a lot of weight recently, not just from being in the dungeon based on the stretch marks around his body."

He continued to inspect and infer a great number of facts about the corpse, analyzing every inch of it as Kane watched with bewilderment. He had thought that he had made some sharp deductions, but Rui showed him how wrong he was about that as he seemed to conjure up information where there shouldn't have been any information.

"In conclusion, this man was a small-time married craftsman living on the outskirts, or even entirely out of the Shionel Confederation in a small village or settlement, probably making a living selling small crafted trinkets outside the Shionel Confederation in the flea markets that we rank into when we were entering the Shionel Confederation," Rui concluded.

"How are you getting all of this?" Kane furrowed his eyebrows.

"The science of deduction," Rui replied while analyzing the corpse. "You gather all the pieces of information that you can and infer truths from them. But it's not absolute, far from it. My conclusion could be wrong. And there are things that don't really make sense."

"Like what?" Kane asked.

"It's hard to judge because this sickly black color of his skin is from poisoning, this is not natural rotting," Rui explained patiently. "I can also sense esoteric substances of this dungeon inside his body based on the fact that my ordinary senses are not able to sense through his body as clearly as they should. But the issue is that he hasn't been dead for too long as established, yet it seems clear that he has been in the dungeon for much longer than he has been dead. What question naturally presents itself?"

Kane's eyes widened as he understood what was wrong. "How the fuck did he survive this long in the dungeon?"

"Exactly," Rui nodded. "This is a revolutionary discovery. Frankly, I'm unable to come up with a compelling hypothesis as to how this could possibly happen. What's even more astonishing is that he did not die of a wound."

"Which means that he wasn't killed by a monster this entire time?" Kane frowned. "That's impossible! Even Martial Squires die when they get lost in the dungeon. To other monsters."

"Exactly, yet this fellow died due to an affliction with poison despite having clearly spent a lot of time in the dungeon based on the scraps that his clothes have been reduced to, the clearly overgrown facial hair among other things," Rui paused before continuing. "That just means that this man somehow survived this long in the Shionel Dungeon. Hell, he's outsurvived even Martial Squires. There are loads of esoteric substances in his body. It's actually a miracle that he did not die instantly."

The two of them silently pondered about it for several seconds, before agreeing to give up. It was a fascinating curiosity, but ultimately not too relevant to them.

"What should we do with the body?" Kane asked.

"Not much to be done," Rui shrugged. "It's a corpse. But I am interested in which direction came from. Maybe we can trace the man's footprints."

"Will they even be discernable beyond a certain distance?" Kane frowned.

"Not too, but I can work with anything," Rui closed his eyes as he focused Riemannian Echo across the tunnel, following any traces of human footprints that he could. "It helps that this tunnel route is not subject to wind drafts, or other things traveling across it too much. Otherwise, it would be long gone."

He opened his eyes. "I've found a brief path, but it stops at a certain point, might as well investigate it."

Kane shrugged. "Sure thing."

The two of them proceeded to swiftly follow the path that the corpse had taken.

"It's undiscernible beyond this point," Rui announced as they arrived at a juncture of many tunnels. They couldn't tell which direction the man came from.

"Well, why not just do a super long-range sweep anyway?" Kane suggested. "We can proceed normally from here on out.

"True," Rui nodded, before extending his senses in one direction. "I doubt we'll find anything worth-!"

His eyes widened as his jaw opened up a bit.

"What?" Kane noted his reaction, raising an eyebrow. "What is it?"

"It's... It's a new floor!" Rui grinned. "Let's go!"

He rushed forward before Kane could even respond to him, forcing the latter to break into a run to follow him.

"Here it is," Rui stopped a few meters as a large tunnel opened up to an enormous cavity. "This is the thirteenth floor!"

"Woah..." Kane peered in, squinting. He wasn't able to see too much due to the vision range limits. "What's it look like in there?"

"Hold up, let me scan it properly first," Rui replied. "It's pretty big. As for what inhabits it, I'm only seeing some-!"

A genuine expression of shock and bewilderment suddenly occupied his face.

"What is it?" Kane grew more nervous at his even exaggerated reaction.

"This can't be," Rui murmured. "This should be absolutely impossible. How can there be even more humans on this floor?!"

Chapter 840: Explore

"What?!" Kane almost whispered as he glanced back at the new floor.

The ceiling of the floor was strangely lit up, as it usually was. There wasn't much he could see on the ground due to the high density of esoteric resources that obscured his vision greatly.

"There's no mistaking it. They're human beings. Some even have clothes on that are clearly man-made," Rui murmured, his eyes lost as he focused on his Riemannian Echo. "They're not Martial Artists, I highly doubt that they are. Besides, that's not all there is. This place is unbelievable. We need to get to the bottom of this."

He turned towards Kane. "You're up. It's time for us to vanish."

Kane nodded as he put a hand on Rui's shoulder as they began sky-walking down, vanishing into thin air.

STEP

They reached the ground, looking around vigilantly as they walked forward in the direction that Rui directed them in.

"You said that's not all there was," Kane turned to Rui with a mixture of interest and concern. "What else is there?"

Rui didn't reply, instead choosing to gesture forward.

Kane frowned as he turned forward squinting as a large object made its way into his hampered field of vision. Yet it wasn't until after he actually realized what it was, that his eyes widened with complete shock.

"Is that a... building?!" Kane raised his voice.

"Sssh!" Rui told him to quiet down but nodded anyway. "You're right."

"That's insane!" Kane couldn't believe that he would run into a building on an undiscovered floor in the Shionel Dungeon.

It was already a shock that there were non-Martial Artist humans on the floor, but to think that they were creating buildings? Inside a dangerous floor that had yet to be cleared? That was on another level of unbelievable.

The building wasn't particularly large, it was just a small single-story house, from the looks of it. Furthermore, its condition was extremely poor as he identified several places of collapse. It was hardly habitable, if at all.

Still, that did not change how absurd the notion of a house inside an uncleared dungeon floor was.

"Don't shout," Rui urged. "You might attract their attention."

"Their? The humans? If they're alive we ought to help them. The least we could do is inform the Shionel Adventurer Guild. Why don't you want to attract their attention?"

"It's better if I show you," Rui sighed as they walked forward.

"Show me wha-!" He underwent his umpteenth shock for the day as he beheld a strange creature that entered his field of vision.

No, not a creature.

It was human, but it may as well have been a creature.

The skin across her bare body was a sickly black from head to toe, just like the corpse that they had encountered. Yet she wasn't dead. She was very clearly alive. Her eyes were blackened too, where they should have been white.

"What the fuck." Kane couldn't help but whisper. He didn't even care that she wasn't a Martial Artist, he was not undoing Void Step. He could feel a sense of threat to him regardless of the fact that she wasn't a Martial Squire.

Her body retained its human figure even though her skin had taken a sickly black creature that made her look like a walking corpse, her skeletal and muscular structure had remained unchanged. Her flesh too had retained normal human features, as did various features like her face, hair, and secondary sexual features and characteristics. It just appeared as though she had been rotting from the inside, rather than the outside.

Kane abandoned any thought of trying to communicate with the humans. It was very evident that such a thing was not going to work out.

"She's mindless, almost like a monster," Rui confirmed his own thoughts. "Dilated pupils, incoherent noises, lack of awareness of surroundings or even self-awareness."

The two of them watched speechless as she aimlessly seemed to wander about without purpose. It was clear that she had no conscious cognition of the world around her. From what Rui could see, she was not operating on even a primal instinct or drive. Her movements were slow and lazy, as she was dragging herself forward.

"What the hell is going on here Rui?" Kane asked, disturbed by what he saw. "What is that? Is that the same as the corpse we ran into? Was that man also like her? Are they all like her? Where in the world did the buildings come from if these people are all mindless? No, where in the world did these people come from? Are they monsters that deeply resemble humans? Is that it? Is that why they're unaffected by the psychological pressure?"

Kane had so many questions that he had no idea where to begin. He was witnessing multiple impossibilities unfold right before his very eyes!

He had no idea how to even begin approaching analyzing such a thing.

"Calm down," Rui told him with a composed voice, yet even his expression was very severe and grim. "Let's gather as much information as we can before we make sense of this. There's no point in trying to force ourselves to make do with less information."

Rui already had some thoughts on the matter, but he refused to voice them until he was at least less incredulous about them. It felt far too absurd to voice out what he was thinking.

"...You're right," He sighed.

They ignored her as they proceeded forward, exploring this strange new floor. The two of them ran across multiple buildings and even road-like pathways between them. Most of the buildings were homes, they were all extremely damaged with many being reduced to complete rubble.

Rui's eyes widened as he came across some normal human corpses in some of them. "These aren't sickly black like the others. It's rotting the same way a normal corpse does."

It looked to be about a year old and the corpse had largely deformed and the skeleton was visible.