

Martial Unity 841

Chapter 841: Veril

This was definitely a strange outcome. There were corpses on the floor that clearly died of natural causes that rotted normally. Furthermore, the skin of many of these corpses was sickly black.

"So the skins of these corpses that rot naturally and have been dead for quite some time were not the greenish-black like the others," Rui made an empirical observation. "That's interesting... That implies a correlation between them."

He glanced at the buildings. "Furthermore, these buildings were not constructed after the Shionel Dungeon was discovered. Not only is the age of the exterior worn away to a degree that is impossible to occur within a year but there's also an indication of erosion due to rain, which is absolutely impossible inside the Shionel Dungeon."

"So you're saying this isn't some strange feature of the floor, but that these buildings were constructed before Shionel Dungeon even came to exist, but wouldn't that mean...?" Kane frowned as the answer came to him.

"The town of Veril was a town that existed right outside the outskirts of the Shionel Confederation," Rui explained. "It used to occupy a place that is now occupied by the massive Shionel Dungeon. It was presumed that the town and all its inhabitants had been completely annihilated when the Dungeon erupted, as not a single trace, not even so much as a single brick from the entirety of the town had been found. People assumed that this meant that the town was utterly annihilated and crushed within the dungeon... There was even a large memorial honoring the deceased town and townspeople even if wasn't explicitly a part of the Shionel Confederation. However, if I'm not wrong, then this place is probably..."

Kane turned back to the corpse and the abandoned building with a dropped jaw. "And just like that, it became a dungeon floor? What are the odds, honestly?"

"I don't know," Rui admitted. "But it makes sense. The town would have had zero vegetation given that it was densely colonized, which meant that there was no vegetation in the village whose roots eventually reached the deep subterranean mine of esoteric mineral deposits, absorbing them and undergoing dungeonification. Thus the town as a whole was not overrun with roots immediately and instead got absorbed into the dungeon as a single piece."

"That's unbelievable, honestly," Kane sighed. "It's really hard to believe that despite being in the middle of everything, the town survived."

"Well," Rui remarked. "Survived is a strong word."

He gestured around to the broken building of which only the foundations were intact, the many long-rotted corpses that clearly died painful deaths. The corpses were mangled and broken, some corpses had heads that were completely flattened by debris.

"True," Kane nodded. "Still, that alone doesn't explain everything. Even if this town is the town of Veril that somehow survived being absorbed into the Shionel Dungeon. How does that explain the state of all the surviving people? How the hell did they become mindless monsters."

Rui considered the question, before sighing. "The same way all the animals taken into the Shionel Dungeon became monsters. I can't believe it, but the mutations and physiological changes caused to the humans that survived ingesting esoteric substances into their bodies caused them to all become those sickly creatures."

That was the only explanation that made sense to Rui, he genuinely couldn't conceive of even a somewhat reasonable explanation besides from this. It also matched his senses being hampered when he tried to use them to gather information on the man's corpse, thereby indicating the presence of the same esoteric substances that were ever present in the Shionel Dungeon.

"So these poor people had consumed whatever they found, and inadvertently started becoming like that?" Kane asked with a grim expression.

"Most likely," Rui nodded, sighing.

"Can they be helped?"

"...I can't be entirely sure, but almost certainly not," Rui evaluated. From his understanding of esoteric medical technology, this level of mutation and poisoning of esoteric substances probably could not be accomplished. "At the very least, if there does exist some solution out there. It almost certainly cannot

be applied to humans on such a large scale as such a solution would include prohibitively rare and important esoteric resources. The Shionel Confederation would never spare such expenses and assets for low-class citizens that weren't even officially part of the nation."

"I see..." Kane sighed.

"Still, that doesn't mean we can't do anything for them," Rui replied. "All of them must be suffering horrendously on the inside, even if it doesn't look like it. The least we can do is end their nightmare and put them to rest."

"Yeah, I can definitely agree with that," Kane stood up. "Let's do that before we plunder this entire floor."

The two of them were under no obligation to do this. They could have followed their normal plans and harvested the floor of any esoteric yields that it had to offer. Yet, despite this, they both unanimously agreed to kill all the humans in the thirteenth floor and put them out of their misery.

"Be careful, however," Rui warned him. "If I'm not wrong, these people are no different from monsters at this point, they'll resist and fight back. They probably will display aggression as well considering that even docile species when monsterified turn hyper-aggressive. We'll have to fight."

In Rui's eyes, they were basically zombies.

"No problem."

The two of them stepped out in the open, releasing the Void Step technique.

"Hurh?" Many wandering humans were in the vicinity as they noticed the presence of the duo. Their bloodshot, black eyes widened and their pupils sharpened as their eyes seemed to regain focus and awareness. "AAAAAARGH!"

They let out guttural screams as they blasted forward toward the duo inhumanly fast with widened drooling jaws and arms stretched out.

WHOOSH

BOOM!

Rui avoided a bullrush as the woman crashed into the ruins of the buildings that they had just exited, completely destroying it with her remarkably powerful momentum.

"They're as powerful as low-grade Martial Squires," Rui noted, "Don't let them bite or scratch you though. It's probably highly toxic."

Chapter 842: Painless

CLASP

SHING

Rui summoned his sword from his dimensional storage ring before drawing it rapidly as he was beset by zombies from all directions. Despite their aggression, Rui didn't feel any hostility towards them. It was probably his imagination, but he almost could see the pain, suffering and the longing for it to end in their eyes.

"You won't feel any pain," He subconsciously murmured before they reached his striking zone.

SLASH

In an instant, the Bellhorn Blade arced through the air, disappearing in the eyes of the beholder for an instant.

SPLAT

The heads of the monsterified humans cleaved in two as their eyes instantly lose their light, and their bodies collapsed like puppets cutting their strings. Rui made sure to destroy their brains to ensure that there was no possible way for them to suffer from his attacks. They did not experience any pain, their vision, senses, and even consciousness disappeared when the sub-ice cold Bellhorn Steep triggered the repelling effect of the esoteric substances in their tissue, destroying the tissue on a molecular level.

Frankly, they didn't stand a chance. Not only were they only as strong as he was when he evolved to the Squire Realm, but they also did not possess the ability to hurt someone as strong as him. Even without the Bellhorn blade, he would have utterly massacred them, it was just easiest to give them painless deaths with the bellhorn sword as opposed to any other way.

His offensive techniques would cause too much pain. Techniques such as Reverberating Lance, Flowing Canon, Sonic Bullets, Mighty Roar Flash Blast, and Transverse Resonance would cause far too much pain as it would devastate their bodies, causing them suffering before they finally succumbed to my wounds.

He didn't even need to employ a single defensive technique. None of their attacks were able to reach him. They simply used straightforward attacks, and Rui simply killed them before they got the chance to kill him. The range given by his arm and the length of his sword meant that even if they stretched out their arms as much as they could in order to reach him, his blade would always kill them long before they could.

There was simply no attack that could even reach him for him to defend.

He didn't even bother employing the VOID algorithm this time around. Their attacks were so simple and elementary, even Max and Mana were less transparent than them.

Not only were they not trained, but they were fighting primally, and to Rui their attacks were telegraphed long before they had even begun. He could even predict what they were going to do long before they had even begun the thought process to do it.

The bellhorn blade ceased being a simple sword. It became an arc of death that brought peace to the living that suffered a fate worse than death.

He even had the leeway to focus his attention on Kane with Riemannian Echo. Unlike him, Kane did not possess the ability to solo battalions of Squire-level combat threats head-on. He relied on Void Step to

evade their senses while he made launched his most powerful attack into their vitals which killed them swiftly enough.

He did not have the kind of sheer offensive potency that Rui had, thus he needed to carefully time and place his attacks. Swiftly, he killed the monsterified humans left and right at a rate that, while still much slower than Rui, was far higher than a Martial Squire of his youth in the Squire Realm should have been capable of. It was quite impressive that low-grade Squire-level combat threats were this helpless against him even though he should have been a low-grade Martial Squire himself since it had only been a year and a half since he broke through to the Squire Realm.

Yet he was already graded as a grade-four Martial Squire on account of his phenomenal stealth-based evasion and remarkably powerful Martial Squire constitution thanks to having mastered the Hungry Pain Martial Art technique as a Martial Apprentice. His progress and rate of growth were only surpassed by Rui himself. Only Rui could handle him as easily as he did thanks to the highly potent Riemannian Echo that categorically bypassed the Void Step technique.

In front of almost any other Martial Squire, his rate of growth was startling, as was the potency of his techniques. Yet it was only before Rui that he appeared ordinary.

The two of them were killing the monsterified humans of the town of Veril at a rapid pace, yet their seemed to be no end. It appeared that more humans than Rui had initially expected had survived the eruption of the Shionel Confederation. The sheer number of monsterified humans exceeded the number of monsters in any of the other floors that Rui and Kane had cleared.

('We're basically fighting against half a large town,') Rui sighed.

He was grateful that the monsterified humans were extremely weak Martial Squires, and were also largely mindless and primal.

If they retained all of their human intelligence and rationality while still being hostile to Rui and Kane, they would be much more formidable. Many thousands of low-grade Squire-level combat threats were a huge problem in theory, but their mindless irrationality made them simpler to deal with.

This was why Martial Artists were, as a population, not weaker than beasts and monsters despite being a much smaller group. Martial Artists were of a higher quality, Martial Art allowed them to apply their

power better. Furthermore, in individual fights, combat parameters mattered more, but in a larger-scale comparison, strategy, and tactics mattered more.

That was why the Martial Squires in the Shionel Confederation clearing the Shionel Dungeon were making steady progress defeating the monsters despite possessing fewer numbers. Each Martial Squire could, on average, take down many Squire-level monsters by employing highly effective techniques applied in tried and tested tactics and strategies.

This was part of the reason that Rui and Kane were dominating despite being so outnumbered.

Chapter 843: Mark

If the monsterified humans realized that their current approach was an absolute failure and employed more sophisticated approaches that maximized the effectivity of their numerical advantage, they would have been vastly more problematic than they currently were to him.

POW POW POW!

Kane took down a monsterified human with lethal attacks to her vitals, before becoming visible.

"Huff..." He panted. "Let's take a break."

This was the last monsterified human in the area, thus two of them saw no problem with just sitting on two rocks.

"It's actually easier, but for some reason, it feels way harder than killing ordinary monsters," Kane sighed.

"Probably has to do with the fact that they resemble humans pretty closely," Rui remarked. "It does feel like we're committing acts of genocides, which we kinda are, technically, even if it is for a good reason. So it feels pretty messed up."

"That, it does,"

This whole floor had unlocked a new fear for Rui, of a giant dungeon spawning in the Kandrian Empire and swallowing the Quarrier Orphanage up. That would be something that he found to be too disturbing, and something that he was disturbingly powerless against. If that did happen, then they were as good as screwed. Even if they somehow survived, Rui highly doubted that they would be well by the time he found them.

That was assuming that the dungeon was a Squire-grade dungeon that he could enter. If it was a Senior-level dungeon then he decided that he might as well give up.

He shook his head, putting aside his silly paranoia. The two of them consumed rejuvenation potions, before getting back to work. They would rather finish this quickly rather than drag it out any more than they needed to.

It wasn't too long before Rui and Kane had hunted down every single one of them.

"You sure there aren't any more left?" Kane wiped sweat off his brow.

"Yep, they're all dead," Rui noted.

"Great," Kane sighed. "Let's proceed with the harvesting then,"

"Yeah, about that..." Rui smiled awkwardly.

"What?" Kane glanced at him nervously.

"The floor unfortunately doesn't have as much of a harvest as a normal floor does," Rui replied. "The reason for that probably has to do with the fact that the land did not have the dense vegetation that could absorb from the esoteric mine and bring it to the surface needed for the esoteric substances to reach the surface. The amount is much less than a normal floor, but still far beyond any individual Martial Squire or even a party would normally get their hands on."

"Hm, so we're still short then," Kane hummed. "What do you want to do after we harvest all of the esoteric substances on this floor?"

"I think we still have plenty of energy left, also plenty of potions. We got a good nights sleep last night so we can handle mental rejuvenation potions for quite some time," Rui replied. "Let's continue exploring the dungeon deeper and see if we can clear another floor today."

"Only you could possibly say that and not be joking or lying," Kane laughed. "Soloing two floors in a single day? Oh if only the Shionel Confederation saw us right now. They would all lose their minds."

"They would, before killing us after having discovered our identities," Rui snorted.

"We have masks on," Kane pointed out.

"Masks are too useless beyond a certain point," Rui reminded him. "It's the whole reason I wanted to avoid getting a snap of me taken when the Voidhunter operation had been planned out by Chairman Deacon."

The two of them quickly proceeded with harvesting the fewer deposits of esoteric mineral resources on the thirteenth floor. Given that they did not need to maintain Void Step as they normally did when harvesting esoteric deposits, meaning both Rui and Kane could work independently and gather esoteric deposits simultaneously, doubling their speed.

"Look," Rui gestured to a structure as they reached the edge of the other side of the floor.

It was a giant gate at the edge of the floor, and the town.

"Is that...?" Kane squinted as he inspected it. The structure had a board with words of a language Kane didn't understand inscribed into it.

"It's the entrance gate to the town," Rui replied. "It says 'Welcome to the town of Veril'. It must have survived being absorbed into the town. I have an idea what to do with it."

"What to do with it?" Kane frowned.

"Well, if we were normal adventurers, then we would just have to inform the Adventurer Guild of the floor. But we're not. That would instantly give us away. Even if I used the discrete letters that I communicate with Guildmaster Bradt through, it would give away too much. That man is exceedingly sharp, he might glean something I don't want being gleaned. Still, I'd rather convey to the Shionel Confederation what happened somehow, I imagine that the destruction of town has ruined lives and caused untold suffering that gets swept under the fortunes and the boons of the Shionel Dungeon."

"That's a nice sentiment," Kane remarked. "What do you plan on doing though?"

"I can take the board and place it on the first floor," Rui replied. "Maybe even mark a way to the thirteenth floor by digging up a deep line all the way to the thirteenth floor to indicate a path to get there so that the world finds out. It won't take much time at all. We can immediately resume our exploration of the Shionel Dungeon."

"You know," Kane paused. "You can be a pretty good guy sometimes."

Rui snorted. "Thanks, I guess. I like doing what I can with things in front of me as long as its practical."

He went through with his word, marking a path all the way from the thirteenth floor to the first floor while dropping the board in a place that could not be missed on the first floor. Beyond that, he did not intend to do anything.

The two of them immediately resumed their adventure.

Chapter 844: Reason

That day, a shocking discovery was unveiled to the world. The world came to learn about the board that bore the words 'Welcome to the Town of Veril' inscribed on it. The previous assumptions that every shred of the town had been completely destroyed were now called into question.

Another strange part of the report was the presence of a burrowed line that began from where the board had been found extending all the way down into one of the tunnels of the Shionel Dungeon. Almost as if someone had drawn a deep line with the board into the first floor before tossing it in a place where people would eventually run into it.

What followed was many adventurers and parties following the drawn line all the way to the very end. What they found shocked the entire nation.

People could scarcely believe that after all this time, the town of Veril was still somehow not entirely annihilated. The many citizens who had a connection to the town of some sort gained a shred of hope that the town was salvageable and that the citizens had survived.

Yet, all those hopes were crushed painfully as the floor dubbed as the thirteenth floor came to be discovered, and the sheer carnage left behind shocked everyone. A large town filled with corpses indicating that none of them died anything short of a gruesome death.

What really shocked the world was that half of the corpses were natural and expected.

Their decomposition did not fall outside of the expected parameters, and there were no unexpected parameters. The other half, however, completely mung-boggled them.

The scene left behind by Rui and Kane thoroughly confused everyone that laid their eyes on them. The ghoulish corpses that had clearly died very recently were a bizarre anomaly that was hard to understand since they had not had access to as much information as Rui and Kane had. The latter had witnessed the corpses when they were alive and thus was aware of their tendencies when they were alive.

The former had no idea what the monsterified humans were like when they were alive, which would have assuaged a lot of their doubts regarding what exactly these sickly greenish-black corpses were like.

Another mystery was how on Earth the board of the entrance gate to the town reached the first floor. While it was true that the dungeon was not exactly the most stable or normal environment, there was absolutely no way that such a thing could happen normally.

The tragedy of the town of Veril was once more brought into the spotlight as the many people who had a connection to the town, be it having family members or having been born and brought up in the town of Veril. The many thousands of people who had lost loved ones, and their homes entered mourning as another day of remembrance was declared.

On the other hand, Rui and Kane continued their adventure as the two of them ventured down the Shionel Dungeon.

"Why do you insist on exploring tunnels that end in a dead-end?" Kane frowned as they hit another dead-end. "You know that there isn't anything worth here, yet you insist reach them to the very end."

This was something that Rui had insisted on doing very frequently, earning the ire of Kane. He couldn't see why Rui would go out of his way to do such a seemingly futile action. What was the point in exploring something one knew would not give one what they desired?

"That map I owe Guildmaster Bradt isn't going to draw itself," Rui calmly replied. "Have you forgotten that I'm mapping the entirety of the Shionel Dungeon? That means that I at the very least need to sense every nook and cranny of the entire dungeon at some point."

"Ah, right, Still, that can be done organically when we eventually clear the entire dungeon, right?" Kane asked him. "You're kind of being redundant wasting time exploring places you would eventually explore anyway, so why not just give Guildmaster Bradt frequent updates of the parts of the dungeon that you've naturally mapped?"

"Because that would also tell Guildmaster Bradt about our routes in the Shionel Dungeon," Rui calmly explained. "If I only give him information that I have mapped during our natural exploration paths, then he can figure out exactly what routes we've been using this entire time when he figures out the radius of my sensory range based on the limits of the information I give him."

Kane hadn't realized this. "That does make sense. But it's almost impossible in a practical sense to actually use that against us."

"You'd generally be correct," Rui replied. "But that doesn't apply to Guildmaster Bradt. The man is fiendishly shrewd and devious. Furthermore, he had access to practically endless wealth and power

within the Shionel Confederation. All he needs is a single opening to exploit and he could very soon be on our asses."

"Damn, that's something I would rather avoid,"

"As would I," Rui smiled wryly. "That's why I'm going out of my way to explore other parts of the Shionel Dungeon so I can supply him with mapped information outside of our routes so that he won't be able to exploit it. It's worth taking such precautions. I've met both Guildmaster Bradt and Chairman Deacon in person, and trust me, there's no such thing as being too careful when it comes to tangling with those two."

Kane nodded appreciatively. He knew that if he had been running this operation instead of Rui, he probably would have long been caught by Guildmaster Bradt and Chairman Deacon long ago. He was not qualified to compete with these political titans of the Shionel Confederation. Hell, ordinarily, no Martial Artist would have anywhere near the necessary competencies with them.

But Rui was probably the only Martial Artist that defied this pattern. Despite being a young Martial Squire who had dedicated his life to Martial Art, in Kane's eyes he possessed almost otherworldly insight that compensated for his lack of a background in these fields.

Chapter 845: Discovery

"Besides," Rui shrugged. "Even if these are dead-ends, who knows? We might run into something interesting."

"Yeah ri-" He paused when Rui suddenly stopped walking as he cocked his head and stared hard in a particular direction. "What is it?"

"I sensed something strange at the edge of my sensory sweeps," Rui frowned. "Is that... Is that a big tree?"

He jogged a bit ahead, to extend his sensory range in that direction as his eyes wandered around, lost, as he was absorbed in the sensory feedback that he got from Riemannian Echo.

"A tree? Is that all? That doesn't seem exactly out of place given that the dungeon is basically overgrown trees," Kane remarked.

"It's the size of a small mountain," Rui informed him with a surprised expression. "It's inside a cavity large enough to be a floor."

"Wait, so that's the next floor you discovered?" Kane's grin lit up. "That's awesome, we've finally run into something tangible after exploring this much."

"Yeah, let's get going," Rui nodded as he picked up the pace. "I think this floor might be special."

"Because of the tree?" Kane asked.

"Yeah, and also, I don't sense any monsters on that floor. Everything is strangely stationary," Rui remarked as he ran forward with Gale Force Breathing. "Honestly, there might be nothing worth having there. It's hard to tell from this distance. Regardless, let's reach it first. The problem is, I can't immediately detect a tunnel route to the floor immediately."

The tunnels in the dungeon did not interconnect in an orderly fashion, instead resulting in messy mazes. The presence of these mazes was an additional reason why Rui's maps were basically priceless, the ability to know which direction to go was special.

Rui could either spend a lot of time trying to find a natural tunnel path that leads to the fourteenth floor, or he could try a more forceful method.

"We could try breaking out way through to it, honestly," Rui scratched his head.

It allowed them to create a direct path to the fourteenth floor and they didn't need to waste time running around looking for a tunnel leading them to it. After all, there was no guarantee that such a thing existed. There was no rule that the dungeon abided by that said all tunnels must necessarily be connected to all floors. It could be that there were isolated tunneling systems, and they were simply in the wrong one and would never get to the destination that they were trying to get to even if they ran around for all time.

"Hm," Kane did not want to waste too much time. "How far away is it?"

"About three kilometers in that direction," Rui pointed straight towards the wall of the tunnel. "It's a bit much, isn't it?"

"Yeah," Kane concurred. "Not to mention, the walls of the tunnels in the dungeon aren't weak, it's going to take some effort getting there. Still... I think I prefer the certainty that comes with it."

Kane did not want to spend any more time running around in the tunnels of the dungeon than they already had. Breaking holes into them instead was a fresh way of going about things.

Unlike Rui, he could not sense beyond a certain range outside of his immediate vicinity. This was an incredibly disconcerting feeling that he would rather not subject himself to. The prolonged subjection to the sensory jamming could be stressful. Even though he had spent much longer time in isolation on covert missions, at the very least, he had complete awareness of his surroundings.

"I concur," Rui nodded. "Let's get started. We can do alternating strikes. I'll start us off."

Kane nodded as the two of them took their stances.

Rui rushed forward as he used Flowing Canon as the main strike. All of the muscle groups across his body generated a tremendous power with which he smoothly empowered the strike. He breathed deeply as his fist shook, vibrating back and forth extremely fast, yet extremely mildly.

The vibrating fist collided with the wall as the superhuman might of his Martial body empowered with Outer Convergence, Flowing Canon, and Reverberating Lance struck the wall.

BAM!!!

This one strike alone created a two-meter wide and deep crater that almost entirely blasted a hole in the tunnel.

"Tsk, so small and shallow," Rui tutted, unsatisfied with the result. "The walls of the tunnel must have some decent Squire-level esoterics protecting it."

At his current level, every single strike possessed the ability to fragment buildings to pieces. Yet he still wasn't able to blow a hole in the wall.

BAM!

Kane followed up with a swift piercing kick.

CRACK CRACK CRACK

A hole emerged in the wall. "Still, this might not take as much time as I feared if a single combo can break a hole in it."

"True, still, it's three kilometers," Kane sighed. "Let's not waste time dilly-dallying."

Despite their fears, it took them only three-quarters of an hour before they broke through three kilometers of tunnels.

BAM!!!

"Finally," Rui grinned. "We're here."

The last wall of the tunnel opened up into a huge space with a glowing ceiling that radiated sunlight. "That never fails to surprise me. Do you see the tree?"

"It's blurry as hell, but yeah, kind of. It's freaking huge," Kane squinted his eyes.

Rui on the other hand could clearly get a good image of it with his Riemannian Echo. "That it is, I still don't see any monsters. Which is strange."

"What about the esoteric resource deposits?" Kane asked.

"Hehe," Rui grinned, "You're not gonna believe where they are. Or rather, where it is."

"It?" Kane raised an eyebrow.

"The tree's trunk is slightly elevated above the ground, meaning it's uplifted by its roots that are dug deep into the ground, deeper than even my senses can reach," Rui explained. "And under the trunk is actually a small space, relatively speaking where a huge singular ore is sitting half buried in the ground. A big singular ore the size of a large building."

Chapter 846: Problems

"That's huge!" Kane's eyes widened. "Are you serious?"

"Dead serious," Rui grinned. "Furthermore, there are no monsters. This is a gold mine it seems. Still, we should use Void Step regardless, I'd rather not go without it."

"Sure thing,"

Kane put his hand on Rui's shoulder as he activated Void Step and the two of them sky-walked down in the direction of the tree.

That was when it went wrong.

The branches of the giant tree lashed out toward the two of them at a shocking speed, rocking the very atmosphere of the floor as it shot toward them, reaching them in an instant.

WHOOSH

SPLAT

"...!"

The piercing power of the branches was high, and it surely would have impaled them effortlessly had it actually hit them. Yet it didn't the two barely managed to avoid lethal, incurring only a few light flesh wounds.

They immediately leaped back, shocked.

Kane had reacted because evasive maneuvering was the very core of his specialty. His reflexes, agility, and speed greatly surpassed even Rui. He too had mastered Primordial Instinct a few years ago, and because of extreme compatibility and synergy as well as Kane's own inherently swift reflexes, the technique worked far more powerfully in his hands than it did in Rui's even with the Mindmirror Symbiote.

Rui, on the other hand, managed to avoid it, because, unlike Kane, he saw it coming from much further away thanks to his Riemannian Echo. However, the Riemannian Echo was a reading technique rather than a sense, thus it was slower, which prevented Rui from completely avoiding the attack.

The two of them grimaced as they stepped back.

"What the fuck?" Kane cursed as he covered his wounds.

"That... was unexpected," Rui's expression turned grim. He didn't bother with his wound, his healing would heal them up soon enough. "The tree has a protective mechanism, apparently. It does not allow people to get close by. That much alone is not shocking."

Dungeons also possessed such a feature but it was limited to threat levels above a certain degree. Even the Shionel Dungeon possessed such a trait. It was the whole reason that only Martial Squires were able to enter the Shionel Dungeon while Martial Seniors and above weren't.

That wasn't what shocked the two of them, really.

"What is shocking is that it detected us while we were using Void Step!" Kane gasped.

"Yeah, that's really bad news," Rui grimaced. "Our model of success relies on your Void Step quite heavily. Frankly, without it, we're not that special."

That wasn't entirely true. Rui's methods of fighting monsters in the Shionel Dungeon were very effective and there was no way that that would disappear with the Void Step being effective. In fact, Rui had developed those means of fighting the monsters in the Shionel Dungeon because of scenarios like this where they couldn't rely on his Void Step.

Although he hadn't predicted this particular scenario, he had predicted that there would be instances where they would have to discard the technique. In those instances, the two of them needed to be able to handle themselves.

"I don't get it," Kane grew a little flustered. "How on Earth can it possibly detect us through Void Step? Are its senses just that incredibly sharp?"

"No," Rui shook his head, having already analyzed the matter. "It's because the tree probably doesn't even have consciousness. Its defensive mechanisms are purely reactionary. It is closer to a machine than a sentient being. The Void Step technique relies on misdirecting attention and focusing in the opposite direction of the direction the user is moving in. However, that won't work against something that does not have any awareness that can be misdirected in the first place."

"Damn," Kane cursed as he understood what happened. "So that means that it is super resistant to my technique."

"Not even super resistant. It is literally categorically immune to misdirection completely," Rui told him. "Even if you were a Martial Senior, you would have no chance of successfully using misdirection against that tree."

"Damn..." Kane sighed. "Now what?"

"Based on the fact that it only attacked us after we approached it, its defensive mechanisms are triggered by a range condition," Rui analyzed the circumstances that they were in. "I highly doubt that there is any route to the esoteric ore deposit sitting under the tree that avoids getting attacked. Still, we can definitely give it a try. There are probably several things that we should test in general before we come up with a way to get past the annoying defense mechanism system of the tree."

Rui glanced at his flesh wounds, verifying that they had nearly entirely healed.

"That sounds like real fun," Kane remarked flippantly, feeling deflated. He had been quite hyped that they had finally found a floor after half a day of searching and scanning. Yet the moment they did, it turned out to be a floor where he was entirely useless for the most part. He had no way of contributing beyond Void Step.

He clenched his fists. ('I can't be this weak forever.')

Of course, he was aware that given that he hadn't even spent two years in the Squire Realm, his current strength and capabilities were quite impressive by the norm. Groundbreaking even, considering that Rui's Hungry Pain had allowed him to achieve new heights that surpassed even what a prodigious genius like himself should have been capable of.

But he long stopped caring about comparisons to the norm. He wasn't interested in the norm. When he looked at Rui, he couldn't help but feel useless. Not only did he create brand-new powerful techniques on the fly like they were nothing, but his growth rate was staggering even when compared to Kane. On top of that, the sheer amount of competence, knowledge, insight, and foresight that he had shown not just during their time in the Shionel Dungeon, but also during the mission on Vilun Island.

Although he wouldn't admit it out loud, half the reason he grew stronger was to avoid being left behind by Rui.

Chapter 847: Choices

SLASH SLASH SLASH

SPLAT

Rui grimaced as he leaped back, caressing the wound on his neck. He had attempted to see whether his incredible sword-based offense was able to cut down the branches that lashed out at him when he triggered the defensive mechanism.

Unlike the first time, where both he and Kane were caught greatly off-guard, he was prepared this time when he entered its range. He had just tried to see whether he could potentially make progress against the volley of branches that inevitably blasted toward him.

It was clear that the tree, like all living beings in the dungeon, had been monsterified with the esoteric substances running through its veins. This meant that the chilled Bellhorn Steel ought to be able to destroy the branches apart pretty easily, all things considered. What Rui was hoping for was the destruction to be potent enough to prevent the branches from actually reaching even as he proceeded moving towards the large singular esoteric deposit

He just realized he couldn't.

('It's not a matter of my sword being too weak, my sword is cutting through just fine, the issue is that my slashing frequency speed is not enough to prevent the branches from ever reaching me, especially when moving forward,') He tutted to himself.

It was harder to prevent the branches from striking him when he moved forward for multiple reasons, the first reason was, of course, he had less time to slash at them when he was moving towards the branches than if he was standing in one place. The relative velocity between them grew higher and the branches would only be moving faster from his perspective, making it even harder to cut them down before they could reach him.

Furthermore, the number of branches attacking also increased the closer he got. He had hypothesized that each branch's defensive system was autonomous to a certain extent, and they would simply attack whatever entered the radius. The closer he got to the tree, the more branches detected him and lashed out at him, making it even more difficult than it already was.

('If it's just standing stationarily at the edge of the range of the branch's striking range, I can manage, so can Kane to a lesser degree,') Rui noted. ('But that's not enough,')

Another thing that frustrated Rui was the fact that there was really no scope for the VOID algorithm to succeed. Although the VOID algorithm wasn't strictly limited to humans, it was truly out of its element against a non-sentient tree that only had a single attack pattern; straight. Normally, Rui could drastically reduce his reaction times and lag with the help of the predictive model, but even though he had already created a predictive model, it was nowhere near as shockingly effective as it normally was.

The reason for this was that anybody could predict it, it was just that elementarily simple. The problem was that it didn't really help, this was one challenge that required adequate amounts of speed and destructive power, and unfortunately, Rui's Martial Art could not make up for the gap as easily as he normally did.

"Damn," Rui cursed after hours of attempts. "This isn't good news."

"Yeah," Kane sighed. "We've tried basically anything. Hell, we've tried more than I would have had I tried doing this alone."

"Honestly, this is the first real setback we've faced in the Shionel Dungeon," He said out loud, there have been a few headaches here and there, but this is the first time our winning strategy has been shut down this hard."

"True," Kane concurred, nodding. "What do you think we should do?"

Rui considered his options. There were a few avenues to be considered. The first avenue was simply relying on themselves to slowly make progress and hopefully find a way to break through the tough defensive measures of the tree.

It wasn't that this method was without merits, but to Rui, it was simply far too inefficient. The two of them would have to spend a lot of time hacking it, and Kane was basically useless when it came to cutting down the branches, the only reason he could avoid dying was that he was an excellent evader, that was able to avoid critical wounds.

There was another avenue that Rui was considering.

"Maybe we don't have to do all the hard work," Rui remarked.

"Huh?" Kane tilted his head in confusion. "Like, abandon the floor and look for ones that we're less incompatible with?"

"No," Rui shook his head. "What I am talking about is the fact that we can literally get others to do all the dirty work for us."

"How?" Kane frowned.

Rui smirked. "There are ways to go about this."

From what he could see, it required far too much effort and time for the two of them to slowly chop off all the branches that would attack them if they did try to extract the giant deposit under the hollow space beneath the trunk.

Frankly, if he was not willing to, then he could simply get others to do it for him. Of course, no one would willingly do all the hard work and let Rui and Kane steal the fruits of their labor.

Willingly, being the keyword.

If they were tricked, then Rui could get them to do it under deceived impressions of the fourteenth floor. Still, he needed to trick a large number of people, and that wasn't easy. He couldn't just pass out flyers with a map to the fourteenth floor and the location of the giant esoteric deposit on the fourteenth floor. That would instantly backfire in record time.

It was practically impossible to manipulate a large number of Martial Squires one by one and somehow convey the information to all of them through a hundred different ways, it was just far too impractical to go about such a crude of manipulating Martial Squires. There were more efficient ways of manipulating Martial Squires, and also more poetically satisfying ways of doing it as well.

Chapter 848: Buried

"You wanna go back?" Kane frowned. "Are you sure, after we haven't even made any progress yet?"

"It's because we haven't made much progress that we need to go back," Rui explained calmly. "Also, I'm honestly not even sure that we'd be able to fit that big esoteric boulder into my dimensional storage ring. At the very least, I'd need to empty out all the other stored goods and items in there. So even if we succeed right now, we still need to go back."

"Damn, right, I forgot about our inventory limits," Kane muttered. "Alright, let's head back for now. I'm actually quite tired and could use a recharge honestly. Drinking rejuvenation potions works, but it's not as satisfying as a genuinely natural period of rest."

"True," Rui admitted. "Alright, let's head back for now. I also am curious about the reaction of the Shionel Confederation to the board of the gate of the Town of Veril, honestly."

The two of them had spent more than a day and a half in the dungeon between exploration and trying to break past the defensive countermeasures of the giant tree. It was finally time for them to return back.

The actual travel back did not take that long. Even though Martial Squires could not run at top speed given that there were no straight paths for them to build up speed without slowing down, it was still quite enough for them to jog to quickly cover the diameter of the Shionel Dungeon. The reason that they didn't was also because the tunnels formed a complex maze the path back to which was extremely difficult for most people to navigate. Thus most Martial Squires spent at least an hour both traveling to and back to new floors. Many a time, scouting teams that necessarily spent a lot of time in dungeons needed to spend a lot of time getting back because they were not going to known locations and were instead searching for new floors.

None of this applied to Rui. He didn't need to waste time like every other Martial Squire did when returning since he had memorized the way they came, and also could sense the easiest way out of the dungeon from any given point with just a short time spend scanning with Riemannian Echo.

Within fifteen minutes, they had come out.

Kane grew especially focused as he made sure he made no mistakes when they stepped out of the dungeon with his Void Step technique. This was arguably the most important role Kane played, which was making sure that no one sensed them when they left the Shionel Dungeon. The reason this was extremely important was that the consequences of being spotted when leaving the Shionel Dungeon

during one of their genuine raids were high. They never entered the dungeon officially when they went on one of their mass harvests of esoteric deposits, and instead used Void Step to enter the dungeon. What that meant was that they could never leave the dungeon normally either.

After all, how could Martial Squires that never entered the dungeon magically leave the dungeon?

Of course, most people would not pay much attention to such a thing, and most people would not care to be careful of such a thing.

But Guildmaster Bradt, Chairman Deacon, and Rui Quarrier weren't most people. Each of them was extremely aware of the sheer size of the role that logistical details such as this played. The former two because of a lifetime of experience in the world of business and commerce and intelligence gathering, and the latter because of otherworldly shrewdness and intelligence. None of the three would miss an oddity such as Martial Squires magically exiting from a place that they never entered, and none of the three were stupid enough to make such a mistake, especially when they were going against each other in a battle of information and intelligence gathering.

If Kane made a mistake, then as far as Rui was concerned, it would be time to run and run away far.

Thankfully, Kane was far too careful, and the two of them successfully reached their inn discreetly.

"Ahhhh," Kane sighed in relief. "I can't wait to get into the hot tub."

"You can go ahead and eat without me, I have the usual stuff to do," Rui told him.

"Gotcha," Kane nodded nonchalantly. This had already been the norm, thus he didn't really see anything odd about it. "See you later."

Rui left the inn as he headed toward a particular destination that was actually on the other side of the country. This location would serve as the location for the burial of the esoteric resource supplies that Rui and Kane had harvested, which they would be selling in the name of Esosale Suppliers through the Bradt Distribution Network.

He needed to regularly restock the inventory of Esosale Suppliers, otherwise, the brand that he had built with the help of the guildmaster would be affected to a certain extent. Although he made sure not to shackle himself with such a thing, it was still something he was willing to consider when it was easy and affordable.

It took him a little while to reach the other side of the nation, finally reaching his destination.

"Alright, no one around for five kilometers, let's get to work," Rui pulled a shovel from the dimensional storage ring, before swiftly digging up a huge hole with it that was six feet deep.

THUD

He brought out all the esoteric harvests that he had in his storage, dumping them all in the big hole that he had just buried, before hurriedly covering the hole up once more. He blew some hot air at the sand with his windpipe, getting rid of the moisture in the dug-up sand that darkened it, making it completely indistinguishable from the dry sand around it.

('Let's get out of here before I'm spotted by anyone,') He quickly disappeared as he left behind a big sonic boom in his path.

Chapter 849: Letter

The burying part was easy. What he needed to be more careful of was the envelope that he would send to Guildmaster Bradt that would inform him of the location of the esoteric resource supplies that he had just buried on the other side of the nation.

This was a bit more dangerous since Rui needed to make sure that he didn't by mistake clue Guildmaster Bradt in on his location or identity.

He used the most generic and commonly available and supplied kinds of paper and envelopes with the most common kind of cheap pen. This way, there ought to be no real way Guildmaster Bradt could possibly track him based on the kind of paper, pen, or envelope used. Some might say Rui was being paranoid, but Rui knew better than to assume that Guildmaster wouldn't at least thoroughly look into this avenue once.

He didn't know the extent of the forensic investigative capabilities of this world, even if he knew it most likely was not on par with cutting-edge forensic investigation and analysis in the twenty-first century of Earth. In which case he had to be extremely careful not to leave even a speck of his DNA on the paper. He wore a head cap, a face mask, and gloves that went all the way up to his elbows among other things.

He also used his left hand to write instead of his right one in case Guildmaster Bradt put his letters through a thorough graphological analysis, even using handwriting very different from what he normally used. In his paranoia, he artificially boosted the humidity and moisture in his room by vaporizing a lot of water with his hot air windpipe. This way if Guildmaster Bradt had some means to gauge the location the letter was based on moisture absorbed, he would be sorely thrown off.

With all of these measures, born out of paranoia, in place, even he finally felt confident to begin writing down his letter.

It was a standard coded encryption cipher that the two of them had agreed upon in their meeting when they signed the contract, to convey the exact and hyper-precise coordinates of the buried supplies.

That was the easy part. The hard part was deciding whether he should try and scam Guildmaster Bradt by telling him about the location of the fourteenth floor in the new pierce of the Shionel Dungeon map that he would also be sending to the man as per their agreement.

He had already decided that he was not going to waste time trying to destroy the branches of the tree himself. Instead, he would rather get others to do the dirty work for himself.

('That's not very nice of me,') Rui mused.

He was aware of that. Still, he surprisingly didn't even feel any compunctions about using others to get to his goal. This surprised even himself.

('I suppose it comes down to whether or not I deceived them directly,') he considered.

He did not intend to lie to anybody, or even misconstrue the facts. Hell, he didn't necessarily have intentions of even communicating any information. He could just guide them to the fourteenth floor and

let them make their conclusions and decisions, that too would work out in his favor. At the end of it, when they successfully spend all the necessary time clearing the tree's branches, he would then swoop in, store the thing in his dimensional ring, and then leave peacefully. That, he had no problem doing.

There were no rules in the Shionel Dungeon, and there was a titanic amount of competition. Such a thing was completely normal, expected, and implicitly consented to.

Any Martial Squire who entered the dungeon did so aware of the difficulty, risks, and dangers, there was an awareness that such a thing could happen and was allowed to happen, and was expected to at least be attempted to make happen. That, to Rui, was consent to being subjected to such a thing. Of course, he expected resistance, but he knew he could overcome it.

Although Kane's Void Step did not work on the tree, it worked perfectly well on Martial Squires, and even more so in the Shionel Dungeon. Thus, there was nothing that they could do to stop them.

The only issue he had at the moment was choosing how to get a large group of Martial Squires to work hard on tearing down the branches of the tree in the middle of the fourteenth floor. The manner in which occurred needed to be organic and natural. He couldn't slip a letter detailing the location of the floor and put it under the front door of his target's house.

He could go about it by directly individually informing a large number of Martial Squires about the location indirectly, and have them raid the floor, but the issue was that it was too impractical to do this one by one. Furthermore, one of them was liable to blab and inform the Shionel Adventurer Guild about the location of the fourteenth floor in order to earn the huge bonus that came from doing so. Once that happened, the countless bounty hunters that were hunting for Rui and Kane would also flood the fourteenth floor, partaking in the raid but also keeping a close eye on anyone that could be the Voider.

This was an undesirable sequence of outcomes for Rui.

Why had he made the decision to seek out new floors and clear and plunder them before any other adventurer found them? It was precisely to avoid the hoards of bounty hunters that were greedily eyeing the extravagant hundred million Shionel Gold bounty that Chairman Deacon had placed on his head.

He did not want to invite all of them there.

But how on Earth could he get a large group of Martial Squires that weren't part of the public that was infested with Voider bounty hunters?

('There are really only two forces that possess groups of private Martial Squires large enough for what I need,') Rui's eyes narrowed. (Guildmaster Bradt, and Chairman Deacon.)

Chapter 850: Target

It was true that there were other people he could trick. There were other powerful merchants, such as the Cabinet Merchants of the Shionel Merchant Guild. These comprised the hundred most successful, powerful, and richest merchants and businessmen of the Shionel Confederation. These people possessed an immense amount of power and usually had private Martial Artists exclusively employed by them.

Yet there were very few that possessed the sheer scale that Rui was looking for to clear the fourteenth floor.

The two best candidates were Guildmaster Bradt and Chairman Deacon. These two people possessed the ability to quickly gather a huge number of Martial Squires and raid the dungeon swiftly and clear it. The rest were somewhat less reliable in his eyes.

('So either Guildmaster Bradt or Chairman Deacon have to be the victims of my little scam,') Rui mused.

Of the two of them, he was obviously more inclined to trick Chairman Deacon, but he wanted to make sure he considered all his options. Fortunately, the merits and demerits were obvious.

Guildmaster Bradt may not be a friend, but he was a working partner with mutual interests with Rui. They each had what the other sought, and they worked together to get what they wanted from each other. Rui was able to peacefully sell his harvests with zero hassles, with complete state-guaranteed anonymity so that people like Chairman Deacon couldn't just look at the Adventurer Guild registry and learn of Rui's identity and then send a million Martial Squires, or a single Martial Senior, to assassinate Rui.

Chairman Deacon was far from the only one who would love nothing more than to erase Rui's very existence itself. Rui had inadvertently pissed off pretty much the entirety of the supplier market not just in the Shionel Confederation but also the surrounding and participating nations of the Shionel Dungeon raid as well.

Without the bill that Guildmaster Bradt had passed, that amended the registration and verification protocols of the Shionel Merchant Guild and the Shionel Adventurer Guild, all these people would very easily be able to learn of Rui's identity, and then it was game over for Rui. No matter how potent his Martial Art was, at this stage, he had no chance of surviving the second his identity was revealed.

In the best-case scenario, he would essentially need to sell himself to the Kandrian Martial Union. The Martial Union was probably the only organization with the Martial and political power needed to protect him from the ire of all the surrounding countries. Although Rui would no doubt be on the blacklist of all these nations, none of them would dare fight the Martial Union just to kill him. Rui was not worth waging a war against one of the most powerful Martial organizations on the east side of the Panama Continent.

Still, Rui had willingly traded an accurate precise three-dimensional map of the Shionel Dungeon in exchange for the anonymity amendments. Guildmaster Bradt had basically drooled at the prospect of a map that could allow him to smoothly travel in and out of the Shionel Dungeon with complete and precise knowledge of what route he could take and what was where.

The two of them had a good working partnership, and although that matter was distinct from the matter of the fourteenth floor, Rui did not want to cause any bad blood to happen between them. It was just unwise, all things considered.

('That leaves us with our good old friend Deacon,') Rui smirked.

It was decided, he would use Chairman Deacon to do all the hard work for himself. The question was how he ought to go about executing such a plan. His goal was to get Chairman Deacon to try and monopolize the Shionel Dungeon, and invest energy into cutting the tree's branches down so that they could safely access the core.

Once he finished clearing all the branches, Kane and Rui could sweep by with Void Step, pluck the giant esoteric ore deposit and drop it into their dimensional storage, and then simply leave.

The issue was conveying the existence and location of the fourteenth floor to Chairman Deacon in an organic and unsuspecting manner. If he conveyed the information too blatantly, then it would certainly arouse the suspicions of Chairman Deacon and he would be extremely careful and cautious. If he simply sent Chairman Deacon an anonymous letter, that would instantly trigger all the warning bells in the head of someone as shrewd as Chairman Deacon.

Why would anyone give away such a treasure so easily for free? In what world did that make sense? Why was it sent anonymously through an unsigned letter?

Such questions would be flying through his head and in his paranoia he would most likely excessive time investigating. In his paranoia, he might even make different decisions that would conflict with the way Rui wanted things to go.

That was highly undesirable to Rui.

('Thus, I need him to come to learn of the fourteenth floor organically and naturally,') Rui decided. That meant he could absolutely not convey the information himself, that wouldn't really work out no matter the way he chose to go about it.

('The objectively best way to get him to organically come to learn about the fourteenth floor is by discovering it himself,')

Rui knew that Chairman Deacon had an entire department in his company dedicated to exploring and discovering new floors and places inside the Shionel Dungeon.

('If that department happened to stumble upon the fourteenth floor, then that would be the least suspicious way for him to have gotten access to that information,') Rui just needed to figure out a way to make that happen. The issue was how he ought to go about it. He knew that Deacon Industries dispatched exploratory teams into the dungeon in different directions hoping to run into new floors, the best option he could think of was to somehow manipulate one team into reaching the fourteenth floor. Though he hadn't yet figured out all the specifics.