

Martial Unity 931

Chapter 931: Factors

"I thought you didn't care about the elections," Kane asked one day when the fateful day was arriving sooner, raising an eyebrow as he watched Rui reading one of the campaigning ads of Chairman Deacon.

"I didn't before, but..." Rui's eyes narrowed. "That was because I thought Guildmaster Bradt had it in the bag without any shadow of a doubt."

"You're telling me he doesn't?" Kane raised an eyebrow. "I thought Guildmaster Bradt was the most kick-ass merchant in the Shionel confederation and no one could possibly trounce him head-on."

"These things don't work like a Martial Art fight, you know," Rui replied, amused. "Political and economic competitions are such that their personal capabilities matter less than you think. Yes, Guildmaster Bradt is extremely competent as a merchant, but the same can be said for Chairman Deacon. They have their own strengths in the way that they operate. The differences in their personal capacities as merchants and political leaders are not going to be tie-breakers. There are other variables that are arguably far more important."

Kane glanced at him. "Like...?"

"Circumstances," Rui replied shortly. "Opportunities. Even plain old luck."

"Circumstances like the Shionel Dungeon?"

"Yeah," Rui nodded. "I bet Guildmaster Bradt hates the Shionel Dungeon ever appearing, given his nature, he had probably constructed an extremely elaborate long-term strategy to maintain political power over longer periods of time. The appearance of the Shionel Dungeon must have completely ruined each and every single one of those plans. It also threatened to give Chairman Deacon exactly what he had wanted all these years; a wide-open opportunity to break Guildmaster Bradt's unshakable political dominance."

There were some things that nothing could compensate for, and one of them was the sheer amount of unfathomable growth that Chairman Deacon was getting thanks to the Shionel Dungeon. The Shionel Dungeon empowered the man's field and industries to a level that it did not boost other fields and sectors, especially not Guildmaster Bradt's field.

What was one supposed to do when faced with such a titanic disadvantage, when his opponent was highly competent and would certainly exploit and abuse it to the very maximum?

Without being willing to take extraordinarily bold risks, without willing to bleed for the sake of simply not getting trampled over.

Yet even then, it most likely would not be enough in and of itself. The reason for that was that Guildmaster Bradt's opponent was known to be a relentless bloodhound that never let go. He possessed the trait that Guildmaster Bradt needed to exhibit to maintain his increasingly tenuous position.

Rui was nothing short of a godsend to Guildmaster Bradt, with his ability to steal Chairman Deacon's dominance in the Shionel Dungeon, and his ability to create a dungeon map that allowed for efficient and swift dungeon travel, Guildmaster Bradt had found his opportunity.

Even Rui had initially evaluated that the Guildmaster had the next elections in the bag when he had signed the deal with the man. What he hadn't expected was how well Chairman Deacon would be able to cope and keep up even after the major setbacks that the Voider caused him.

Chairman Deacon had not simply let the loss push him down, but instead, used the opportunity to gather support from merchants that he previously competed with. Previously, these merchants were raw esoteric ore deposits suppliers like he was, they were fierce competitors and he was unlikely to have ever been able to gain their political support. After all, he dominated them in the market, they were certainly not friends with goodwill to each other.

They were likelier to support Guildmaster Bradt, and that's just the way that things were.

But with a common obnoxious enemy that was obviously partnering up with the Guildmaster that was dominating all of them, Chairman Deacon had managed to win over his previous rivals and competitors with a common enemy, buying more political capital.

When he realized how much potential this strategy had, he went all out with it as he aggressively bought over foreign stakeholders to his side by uniting the many foreign and international elements that were dissatisfied with the Voider's dominance.

While these parties could not directly vote in the Shionel Dungeon, their cooperation could be used to buy off voters inside the Shionel Merchant Guild who had interests tied to them.

And Chairman Deacon had not held back even one bit. He had employed his massive economic capital to gather as much of an advantage as he possibly could.

And his efforts appeared to have paid off greatly.

Rui's eyes narrowed as a glint of uncertainty flashed across all of them. "I'd like to be done with all matters surrounding the Dungeon as soon as possible, ideally before the results come out."

"What's the hurry?" Kane's eyebrows furrowed.

"If Chairman Deacon becomes the Guildmaster, it will be bad for us, that's for sure," Rui narrowed his eyes. "The first thing he'll do is undo the amendments to identity verification and registration requirements and get rid of all the anonymity that we have been relying on this entire time."

Kane's eyes widened as he realized the ramifications of this possibility. "We'll be screwed big time if that happens, our entire operation relies on the legal veil of anonymity."

"That's right, I want to make sure that we're prepared for the worst. Although it's not too likely, Chairman Deacon does have a definitive chance of winning this election. I want to make sure that we're prepared for the worst. Because I guarantee you that if he gets elected, the second he gets officially sworn into office, he will undo the bill and try to expose us."

Rui knew that dealing with the Voider would be the very first order of business for the man, he needed to make sure that he had already consolidated all the wealth that he had made and made sure that he was ready to take them.

It wasn't that Rui cared for the actual sum of money, but he didn't want to give Chairman Deacon any chance to seize the fruits of his efforts.

Chapter 932: Meet

"But what if they don't find and try to clear the Root Dungeon before the elections?" Kane frowned.

"We can't allow that to happen," Rui narrowed his eyes. "If push comes to shove then we relocate their checkpoint trackers and guide them to the Root Floor."

"I thought you weren't for doing that though,"

"Yeah, but I hadn't considered the ramifications of Chairman Deacon being chosen as Guildmaster," Rui replied. "It didn't seem nearly plausible as it does today. In that case, I might need to accelerate my plans."

Rui went deep into thought. He had received regular updates on the investigation of the Voider from the Martial Union, but that wasn't enough.

('Looks like I'll have to ask Guildmaster Bradt for an update on the exploration progress of Deacon industries inside the Shionel Dungeon,') Rui mused.

If he was going to adjust the checkpoint trackers that Deacon Industries was using en masse, then he needed to know where they were before he could alter their trajectory. At this point, he could only pray that their paths were long enough that he could make them reach the Root Floor.

If not, then he would have to use cruder means to get them to reach the Root Floor, even if it meant knocking them out by surprise, dropping them in a tunnel approaching the Root Floor, and then sealing off all routes except for one that led them to a floor that Deacon industries had already explored and cleared, to give them an idea of where they were. Since Deacon Industries already would know the location of the floor, the discovery of that tunnel would allow them to be able to reach the Root Floor any time they want, and they would be able to quickly organize their powerful raid team where they would then engage in a war against the Root, just like Rui hoped they would.

He took no guilt about subjecting them to that, nor being the cause of all their deaths. He was a firm believer in the concepts of agency and personal responsibility. The Martial Squires accepted the operations, and became adventurers despite being fully aware of the many risks, even for high-grade Martial Squires, that came with being adventurers. There were multiple avenues where they could have abstained, yet they went for it anyway.

Rui quickly drafted up a letter addressed to Guildmaster Bradt going through the whole process of making sure he didn't leave even a speck of anything that could potentially help Guildmaster Bradt identify him.

Still, at this point, he was least concerned about Guildmaster Bradt. The man needed Rui now more than ever, while Rui needed him less and less as the days passed. The map that Rui was giving him was crucial, and it was now mostly complete, while Rui really didn't care about what happened to his Esosale Suppliers anymore.

"There," Rui sealed the letter. "Kane, could post this letter to Bradt in the usual manner?"

"Sure, what's it for?" Kane plucked the letter out of Rui's hands.

"It's a letter requesting urgently the most updated intelligence on Chairman Deacon's exploration routes and avenues," Rui explained. "We also need to speak with Martial Commissioner Reze."

"Now why do we need to talk with him?" Kane frowned. "He's just going to start droning on and on about the Underworld this and that."

Rui smirked, amused. "You're probably right. But I do need to warn him to ensure that no Kandrian Martial Squires partake in the exploration of the Root Floor, since all those who do, will die."

Kane nodded. "That's prudent, I hadn't thought about that."

"Commissioner Reze will know that I knew of the dangers of the Root Floor, if I don't warn him about it ahead of time, I'll be held liable for sabotage," Rui elaborated. "Also, the Martial Union is one of our few allies, so, we should probably look out for them, especially when it doesn't burden us unduly in any way."

Kane nodded. "Agreed."

It didn't take long for Kane to finish the posting before the two of them visited Martial Commissioner Reze.

"Hm," The man, who was communicating remotely, considered Rui's words. "We appreciate the warning, we will take it under serious consideration. However, I couldn't help but notice that your words implied that you wouldn't necessarily be taking the same precautions."

"I intend to complete my objective, which is clearing the dungeon, one way or another," Rui replied impassively.

Although Commissioner Reze did not so much as budge to the naked eye, Rui could sense and read his alarm at a level deeper than ordinary human cognition could cover for.

He did not like what he heard.

"We strongly urge you to consider otherwise," Commissioner Reze insisted. "We are aware of your remarkable growth, and your unprecedented ability to create powerful new techniques with convenience. However, you're subjecting yourself to great peril."

"I know what I'm doing," Rui replied simply. "I will act as I deem fit."

Commissioner Reze did not respond immediately. Unfortunately for him, he was unable to act too heavy-handed with Rui. The reason for this was that the Martial Union did not have the right to interfere so heavily in what were basically the private matters of a Martial Squire in a region entirely outside its jurisdiction.

"Alright then, we wish you the best of luck," Commissioner Reze offered a courteous smile. "Ah, since you're here, we'd like to provide you with the updates regarding the shell fronts of the mafia."

He provided Rui with a thick document.

Rui couldn't help but raise an eyebrow. "It's thicker than usual."

"The mafia has grown more aggressive in their desire to obtain a greater proportion of the yields of the Shionel Dungeon," Commissioner Reze. "I am aware that you are disinterested in this matter, but you are not disconnected from it, and it does affect your personal interests."

Those words were enough for Rui to take the matter more seriously, even if he knew that that was Commissioner Reze's intent.

Chapter 933: Threats

"Be specific," Commissioner Reze," Rui replied.

"We have indications that the Underworld of the Kandrian Empire is working with Chairman Deacon," Commissioner Reze straightforwardly revealed.

Rui's eyes narrowed as he considered the Martial commissioner's words carefully, perhaps he ought to be a bit more aware of the matter. "That doesn't sound right. Chairman Deacon wouldn't do something that would hurt his reputation. If it comes out that he's colluding with the mafia, then it would severely hurt his image amongst the population..."

Rui slowed down as he instantly understood what Commissioner Reze was getting at.

The latter smiled. "It seems you have already realized why that doesn't matter."

Rui paused for a moment, before nodding. "The Shionel Confederation is a rare example of a nation with a democratic electoral system where ordinary citizens are not allowed to vote. Thus their opinions don't matter."

"Correct," Commissioner Reze nodded. "Even if word spreads of his interactions to the merchant members of the of the Shionel merchant Guild, and even to the Shionel merchant Cabinet, the detriments will be rather limited."

Rui nodded. "Because the Shionel Confederation has highly libertarian and capitalistic policies. No form of goods or services is illegal here. What would be part of the black market in the Kandrian Empire, would simply be part of the ordinary market here."

"Correct again," Commissioner Reze nodded.

"But this isn't too significant to me," Rui nodded. "At the end of the day, as long as my identity is not revealed, it doesn't really matter whose on his side, or whose side the Underworld is on."

"I don't think you understand, given your limited awareness of how the Underworld functions in the Kandrian Empire," Commissioner Reze shook his head. "You yourself are not just at risk, everything you love and care about is at risk."

Rui's eyes narrowed. "What?"

"I'm sure you have entertained the idea of what will happen to your family if you were to be revealed in any way," Commissioner Reze calmly continued.

"I am aware, there is a non-zero chance that Chairman Deacon will go as far as to deploy operatives to kidnap and smuggle them to him to then employ them to leverage against me," Rui coldly replied. "Using them to get me, and then extracting my mining methodology in exchange for their safety, before killing me."

"You have understood the risks associated with Chairman Deacon well," Commissioner Reze nodded. "However, he isn't the biggest threat to everything you care about. At the end of the day, you are a member of the Kandrian Martial Union, an organization with Martial power that is nearly an entire order of magnitude greater than everything that Shionel Confederation can muster up. Chairman Deacon will be quite wary and restrained about what he can do to you. Make no mistake, he will get you killed. But he cannot do so in a manner that can be interpreted as an act of war against the Martial Union and the Royal Kandrian Family. He will not be willing to take such risks especially if he wins, representing the entirety of the Shionel Confederation."

"I am aware of that," Rui nodded. "It's why it's a moot possibility. He's a small fish compared to the Martial Union, and the Martial Union is already deeply exposed and involved with the investigation, he

cannot do as he pleases. He can at most reveal my identity to give all the people who hate me a chance to get rid of me, and work to get rid of me swiftly and cleanly."

"Correct, and among those people will be the Underworld," Commissioner Reze narrowed his eyes. "They do not play by the rules that the Shionel Confederation plays with."

Rui realized where this was going.

"The second they discover your identity..." Commissioner Reze paused for a second. "Your family has perhaps a few hours to live."

He didn't need to say more. For those words conveyed all of the severity of the risks involved. He almost reconsidered the matter surrounding the dungeon, before growing frustrated at that.

This was the first time he felt like his family was an impediment.

The very next moment, he felt like an absolutely horrible person for even conceiving that thought, but unfortunately, that did not mean it was without substance. This was the first time that his considerations of his family's well-being had actually clashed with his personal interests.

He did not want to lead a subdued life. Perhaps it was because his previous life was forcefully subdued, a fate that made him heartache, but he almost felt as if he had to make up for his previous life's suffering. That involved taking risks and clashing against hurdles that stood in the way of his previously unfulfilled personal ambitions.

Sometimes those risks and hurdles involved other people, who could end up dragging more than just him into a mess.

This was the first time he had ever felt it so clearly. The stronger he grew, the greater the weakness his family represented.

Perhaps it hadn't affected him so much since he was always completing personal missions and commissions. But the previous two major endeavors had intoxicated him with autonomy and

independence respectively. The diplomat mission with the G'ak'arkan Tribe had shown him how freeing being in charge was, and had directly created the desire to embark on an endeavor that gave him that freedom, which was why he and Kane had set out for the Shionel Dungeon.

And now that he had spent more than half a year fighting for his own ambitions, he couldn't even imagine going back to undertaking ordinary commissions on a day-to-day basis.

He would be acting as his own agent, but that also meant that any enemies he made would be his own enemies and not the enemies of his clients, or enemies of the Martial Union. That inevitably meant that his family was liable to be dragged in depending on the matter.

And with enemies like The Underworld and Chairman Deacon, he needed to be quite careful.

Chapter 934: Crossroads

Strangely enough, Rui felt as though he had arrived at a crossroads of sorts. The way he dealt with this would likely very well set the pattern for how he would deal with such an issue in the future.

He glanced at Kane, who was silently listening. He expressed concern, but that was purely for Rui. He had no personal interest at stake here.

After all, he did not give a fuck about his family. He would probably grin in amusement if he did cause them any trouble.

However, even if he cared for his family, he would not be worried. The Underworld was not crazy enough to mess with one of the most powerful Martial families in the Kandrian Empire. A family that was led by a Martial Sage, that had produced many martial Artists of all Realms, and who was also the leader of one of the most powerful Martial Sects in the nation.

The actual military and net Martial power of the Underworld paled in comparison to the Martial Union in absolute numbers, which is why the Underworld didn't dare to confront the former in a head-on symmetrical war, among other reasons.

The Arrancar Family was powerful enough to take on the Underworld's Martial forces by itself.

The same could not be said for the Quarrier Orphanage. The thought of it was almost funny.

Their many faces flashed through his head as he thought of the ones that he was especially attached to. Julian, Lashara, Alice, Max, and Mana, among others.

He sighed. "What's your objective with bringing this up?"

"Pardon?"

"I appreciate the warning," Rui replied. "But you wouldn't have gone this deep into the matter unless there was something in it for you. Get on with it."

Martial Commissioner Reze smiled wryly. "You are correct. I shall do as you say. In light of what I have just brought up, I have an offer to make to you, Squire Quarrier."

Rui remained silent, staring at him wordlessly as he already understood what direction this was going.

"We can offer your family official full-time protection," The commissioner continued. "We can guarantee that basically no force will hurt them, be it either due to the active Martial Squire guards that will be guarding them at all times, or due to the passive protection that being under the protection of the Martial Union comes with."

Rui frowned. "That means that they will constantly be accompanied by Martial Squires, correct?"

"Yes, it will be necessary to guarantee their safety," The commissioner nodded. "On top of that, there will be a security detail established at the orphanage's property. They will be strictly protected at all times."

It sounded great with a superficial consideration of the matter, however, Rui was not convinced that this was necessarily a good thing.

"You'll be disrupting their lives significantly, they'll live every day under the fear of being targeted, and suffering in the process," Rui narrowed his eyes.

"Those can be minimized, even if unavoidable," Commissioner Reze replied. "It's a better outcome to them being massacred, correct?"

Rui could not argue with that, but that point made him all the more disillusioned by that. He loved his family deeply and wish only the best for them. He was willing to do much for them, he was even willing to go so far as to die for them if that ever came to be the need.

However, he was unsure if he was willing to shackle himself for that. That was a line that the thought of crossing repulsed him to his very soul.

('Maybe I should use the phenomenal wealth that I got from the dungeon to have dozens of Martial Squires protect all of them from the shadows?') He wondered, before sighing. Such means had limits. He could not possibly earn enough to pay for dozens of Martial Squires basically working full time, and eventually even his massive wealth would whittle down, regardless of how long it took.

Furthermore, the more he went down such a path, the more enemies he would make and the more protection he would need to impart.

He tried imagining what life was like for a famous and notorious Martial Master with a large family of ordinary humans, with many enemies who would love to make him suffer. The sheer anxiety of something happening to his family was something that he could not even begin to fully realize. He wouldn't even be able to sleep with such fears plaguing his heart.

('Is this the reason that powerful Martial Artists tend to have Martial Families that are strong enough to defend themselves? Because having normal families is too much of a weakness and a liability?') Rui wondered inwardly, trying to gauge the motivations of higher-ranking Martial Artists.

The more he detached himself from humanity and transcended his limits as a Martial Artist, the more he found himself distinguishing himself from normal humans, psychologically.

He shook his mind returning to the present as he considered Commissioner Reze's offer.

"I'll think about it," He ended up saying, unable to choose in the heat of the moment.

"That is understandable," He nodded in response. "I did not expect you to make your mind up on the spot. Take some time to consider the matter."

The meeting soon came to an end before Rui and Kane left, returning back to the inn.

"We should also stop by the Shionel Dungeon sometime today," Rui remarked. "Guildmaster Bradt will have likely already prepared the information and data that I am looking for. As long as things are fit, we can commence the plan any time."

After the conversation he had just had, Rui couldn't help but strongly hope that the exploration teams of Deacon Industries had made deep enough progress into the Shionel Dungeon so that he could redirect their path leading straight to the Root Floor. In the worst-case scenario, he would need to take the checkpoint trackers of other exploration teams and add them to the route he was trying direct them to the Root Floor through.

Chapter 935: Redirect

Later that day, Rui and Kane headed into the Shionel Dungeon, to the first floor. As always, Rui brought out an entire suit that covered his entire body, donning it before passing one to Kane.

"Again?" Kane asked with an exasperated sigh.

"Guildmaster Bradt is relentless," Rui insisted, digging up the box of documents.

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The sound of a gas escaping the box reached their ears as Rui paused. "Hah, I knew it. He would try the same old stinking trick again."

Kane had to admit that Rui was right, shrugging.

Rui quickly took the document to one of the latest floors that they had cleared that hadn't been discovered yet, before Rui quickly skimmed through all the data in the documents, mindlessly inputting them into his Mind Palace to read properly later on.

Rui incinerated the documents and boxes to ashes before storing the suits in his dimensional ring as the two of them returned back to the inn.

"So?" Kane asked once Rui had some time to parse through all the data that he had collected from Guildmaster Bradt.

Rui grimaced. "It'll take them too long before the closest adventuring team will have traversed far enough."

Kane tutted as he went deep in thought. "So... What do you want to do? Maybe we should just have faith in Guildmaster Bradt in winning the elections."

"Nope," Rui immediately rejected the idea. "I do not wish to leave things in the hands of others I cannot trust. Guildmaster Bradt is definitively highly competent, but that's far from enough."

"So what do you plan to do?" Kane asked seriously.

"I'll have to go with one of my earlier alternative plans," Rui replied. "For example, Stealing checkpoint trackers from other exploration teams before using them to extend the path of one exploration team so that they could reach the Root floor."

"That sounds like a lot of work," Kane muttered.

Rui would need to travel calculate the amount of distance that he would need to add to an exploration team's path, and then steal just the right amount of checkpoint trackers to add to the path.

"Yeah," Rui sighed as he got up.

"Where are you going?" Kane raised an eyebrow.

"To get started of course," Rui replied. "No need to waste time. It'll be quicker if I go by myself this time, so you can stay back and relax."

"Alright, I'm not complaining," Kane shrugged as he reclined back. "Have fun doing all that tedious manual labor."

Rui shook his head with a wry smile as he left the inn, heading for the Shionel Dungeon.

He already knew everything he needed to do since he possessed a map of the Shionel Dungeon inside his head, while also possessing the exploration routes of the various exploration teams.

('There are so many of them that it makes my life easier. Thank god for Chairman Deacon being so aggressive in his exploration in his hopes of trying to match me,') Rui was glad that Chairman Deacon had invested this much into setting out hundreds of exploration teams on different exploration routes.

Such a large number of exploration teams could effectively match Rui's own explorative capabilities in the Shionel Dungeon. It was why they had managed to obtain success that matched Rui's own success.

('Only took merging basically everybody into a single force,') Rui snorted.

The difference between their explorative capabilities was that they had greater range, but the quality of their exploration was low, while Rui had a more limited range, but could sense everything within that range.

Rui quickly dove deep into the Shionel Dungeon as he swept across the many routes that Deacon Industries was exploring and stole checkpoint trackers from the very end of their routes.

('I need about a hundred and eight of them,') Rui calculated the number he needed based on the maximum distance between the checkpoint trackers.

He made sure to take only one tracker from each route so that he didn't significantly shorten any one particular route. He also couldn't take from routes where he found the exploration team still actively searching.

All in all, he had spent more than half a day inside the dungeon, gathering everything he needed from as many exploration routes

He quickly headed down to the exploration route that he had chosen to redirect, painstakingly relocating hundreds of checkpoint trackers in the paths that he deemed necessary and fit, allowing him to change their path into a tunnel that led them straight down.

Then he stacked the extra checkpoint trackers to extend the route further and further down. The deeper he went, the more he began feeling an overwhelming sense of pressure as his Riemannian Echo could sense the creepy roots extending from the Root as it began digging up esoteric ores for consumption and delivery to the rest of the dungeon.

He steeled his mind as he got further and further to the floor.

Until he was merely fifty meters away. That was a good distance to drop them off, he then made sure to seal off any alternative routes that they could take that could detour them from the Root Floor, forcing them to go through the tunnel that would open them up to a massive cavity that was once a completely filled mine.

Three-quarters of a day later, his work was finally done. He steeled his will as he prepared himself for the final step in his preparation for taking down the Root, and claiming the final floor of the Shionel Dungeon as his.

The data that he would get from the Deacon Industries' raid from the Root Floor would give him the final piece of the puzzle and would allow him to confirm what he had been wanting to know for quite some time now. Whether the plan to take down the Root that he had devised would actually work or not.

With this move, he had set into motion a series of events that would bring about the end of this saga, one way or another.

Chapter 936: Raid

"Sir," A woman walked into Chairman Deacon's office.

"What is it?" he growled. "I'm busy."

Before him was a wide array of documents that contained reports and analyses on any and all matters that pertained to the election.

The elections were right around the corner, it was just a matter of days. At this moment in time, for the first time in a long time, the Shionel Dungeon was a secondary matter. Although he certainly paid attention to the matters of his company, he was far more invested in the matters of the elections.

Fortunately, his work in that regard was going well. The countless allies that he had united and supported in the battle for dominance within the Shionel Dungeon were all aiding him in the dungeon. He had already bagged at least forty percent of all the votes for certain. These included his allies, or people who his allies had bought leveraging their capital to get them to vote for Chairman Deacon.

Given that his allies consisted of countless local merchants and corporations and many international powers, his support group was huge. Yet he wasn't overconfident, he knew that Guildmaster Bradt had a gigantic support network that he used to leverage a large proportion of the voters.

Right now he was simply looking at the ways in which he could leverage his capital to reel in more voters. This required knowing the people he was trying to reel inside out, and using his capital to appeal to their interests.

This was an extremely difficult and rigorous process, one that he had already extensively gone through, he was just looking for any and everything that could tip the scales even more towards him.

"It's important sir," She insisted. "An exploration team has reported the discovery of a new floor."

"That sounds standard," Chairman Deacon frowned. "Just execute standard protocols around it, no need to bring this matter to my attention."

"Sir, the exploration team's data has indicated that the floor is most likely the bottom-most floor of the Shionel Dungeon and that it is actually the mine that created the Shionel Dungeon in the first place."

Those words drew Chairman Deacon's attention. "What?"

"It's true, sir," She confirmed as she handed him a document containing all the data that had been collected about it.

"Hm," He quickly skimmed through the reports on the matter. "Fascinating. Assemble the best Martial Squires we and our allies have, and put together a strong raiding expedition as soon as possible. I want us plundering this floor before that bastard Voider ever gets a chance at it."

He turned towards her. "Handle it. I have my hands full with the elections, they take priority."

"Will do, sir,"

Within a few days, a large sum of Martial Squires had gathered in a facility in the main branch office of Deacon Industries.

More than one thousand high-grade Martial Squires had gathered in the facility, each prepped and ready.

Before all of them stood three Martial Squires.

Each of the three of them exuded an avalanche of sharp pressure that washed over all of the other Martial Squires.

"I am the captain of the raid force, Cernet Deacon," The man announced. "I will be leading our force into the Shionel Dungeon and into the recently discovered fifty-second floor. The plan, the protocols, and the strategy remain the same as always. There is no need to fix what isn't broken, and we will execute the winning formula for clearing floors."

He began quickly breaking down the strategy and protocols for each of the Martial Squires.

Of course, by now, nearly all of them were intimately familiar with how to get things done in the Shionel Dungeon. The captain was merely going through all of it once for the sake of formality.

"Normally, Chairman Deacon himself would be addressing all of us, however, the chairman is unfortunately preoccupied with more pressing matters," The captain explained.

None of them had missed his last name matching the last name of the chairman. The man was the son of the chairman, and a grade-ten Martial Squire as well, having received the best of tutelage and training and growth resources from a young age.

"Regardless, he needs us now more than ever. As all of you have been briefed, this floor is most likely the mine that the Shionel Dungeon was empowered from. This floor is the final and the lowest floor of the entirety of the Shionel Dungeon," He reminded all of them. "Whoever clears this floor, wins the race to the bottom of the Shionel Dungeon. They will be the winner. This victory will have great consequences for the upcoming elections. A victory could seal the chairman's victory. While a loss..."

He didn't even bother finishing his words, wanting to avoid dampening the atmosphere.

"Today, we fight for more than our victory, we fight for the victory of our patron," His eyes narrowed. "We shall win, no matter what it takes. Remember that."

The captain was mindful to not attempt to make the speech more sentimental. At the end of the day, these Martial Squires were not soldiers, they were adventurers who were patroned by Chairman Deacon and reeled firmly into his side with remarkably attractive deals. They were not loyal personal warriors of the man like his own internal Martial Squires, like the captain.

The raid force was soon dispatched. They marched through the sky in an orderly manner drawing great attention from the public.

"Oh, that's Deacon Industries' raid force entering the dungeon again. Looks like they found another floor in the dungeon."

"Chairman Deacon still diligently clears the dungeon despite the elections nearing."

"It's because the election is nearing that he diligently clears the dungeon, idiot."

A large number of people talked about the matter, gossiping to no end. One of the reasons that Chairman Deacon had his raid force sky-walk through the air in such a manner was essentially for a novel form of of himself, all in hopes of gaining more support.

Chapter 937: Arrived

"Good," Rui nodded when he observed how quickly Deacon Industries had put together a giant raid force. "Still, captain 'Deacon' eh? That was unexpected."

It looked like Rui had underestimated how much the conflict between them could intensify.

Rui shrugged, it wasn't his fault that Deacon's son was going to die. It would happen eventually given that Rui had no intention of clearing the dungeon before Deacon Industries got a shot at it.

Thus, his son was doomed to die either way.

More importantly, he paid more attention to the quality of the Martial Squires of the raid force, if they weren't strong enough then Rui wouldn't be able to execute the plan in mind. He needed them to be able to pressure the Root enough for it to go all out. Otherwise, he wouldn't get what he was looking for.

Thankfully, it appeared that Chairman Deacon understood the consequences of failing at this stage, for the raid force consisted of Martial Squires that each appeared to be quite high-grade to his senses.

There even were multiple grade-ten Martial Squires in the crowd, along with Chairman Deacon's son who was serving as captain. These were Rui's greatest hope in drawing as many active patterns out of the Root and allowing Rui to gain a greater understanding of the Root.

One thing he was concerned about was his ability to keep up with the entire battle. There were more than a thousand Martial Squires present before him at the moment. Each one of them was going to be engaging one if not multiple, roots. Rui needed to not only perceive all of them but also make sure that he was consciously aware of what was happening with each of the one thousand Martial Squires of the raid force before him.

It was no different from a normal human being trying to keep up with the one thousand human fights, all at once simultaneously.

It was an absurdly difficult task that normally Martial Squire would be able to accomplish.

Except for Rui.

With his mind that had gone through lifetimes worth of growth, surpassing human limits, and his extraordinary mastery of the Mind Palace, Rui estimated that it would be possible for him to at the very least record all the data that he wanted to record, and construct the predictive model based on the active patterns that he could extract from the data that he had collected.

Still, he needed to make sure that he was at his very peak in order to actually accomplish this, thus he had rested his mind extensively the night prior with deep sleep, so he would not only be at his peak but would also be able to return to his peak with a single high-quality rejuvenation potion.

Soon enough, the raid force was dispatched. They sky-walked all the way towards the Shionel Dungeon in a high-profile manner, drawing all kinds of attention from civilians as well as other Martial Squire adventurers.

"Hmp, show-offs," Kane grumbled.

"He needs to show off," Rui replied. "Given how close the elections are, there is no other time that requires him to show off. If he does in fact end up clearing the Shionel Dungeon before the elections, then the sheer prestige that comes with it will allow him to finally decisively surpass Guildmaster Bradt."

What Rui didn't bother mentioning was that there was basically no way they could happen. It was because he was certain that they couldn't clear the Shionel Dungeon that Rui was confidently willing to take the first shot at the dungeon floor, without interfering in the battle in any way.

The raid force quickly entered the dungeon, and soon enough, one of the disadvantages of Chairman Deacon's method of clearing dungeons become evident.

"Hauling all those people through the tunnels of the Shionel dungeon is an incredible pain in the ass," Rui murmured as he watched the more than thousand Martial Squires attempting to squeeze through the tunnels of the Shionel Dungeon with his Riemannian Echo. "I can only imagine how annoying this must get if their route ends up involving tunnels that are extremely narrow and can only fit one person through at a time."

"Imagine if someone farts," Kane remarked, smirking. "That would kill half the raid force given how stuff the dungeon can get."

"Thankfully, I made sure that the tunnels of the exploration route that I chose to hijack were wide enough to ensure nothing like that could happen," Rui remarked with an amused expression.

The journey to the bottom of the Shionel Dungeon took longer than Rui had expected. Then again, given that the raid force was a thousand strong, it had to be expected.

"Still, it's been more than a day," Kane complained as he strutted forward with a hunched posture. "Can't they pick the pace up?"

Kane's role in this entire plan was minimal, he had absolutely no significant role to play, thus he was a little detached and disinterested. Rui was the only one who could perceive the raid force. He was also the only one who could thus track them, and observe the battle against the Root. Furthermore, he was the only one who was going to be taking down the Root.

How he was going to do something that not even a thousand Martial Squires could accomplish, Kane didn't know. But he trusted Rui, and this was far from the first time that Rui had accomplished insane feats.

"Finally, they're here!" Rui informed Kane with an excited tone. "Man, I've waited for this for quite some time. They've arrived at the end of the exploration route, leading to the Root. Let's hurry up and get going."

The two of them scurried forward as Rui eagerly reached a range where he could perceive everything with his Riemannian Echo. He had already scouted a perfect location to perceive the entire fight from without actually being close enough to get dragged into the crossfire.

"It's going to start soon," Rui murmured as he watched the Martial Squires entering the Root Floor one by one.

Chapter 938: Rally

Rui had to admit that his excitement was perhaps a bit distasteful. He was acting the way Zoomers back in his previous life acted when a new movie in their favorite franchise was released. A thousand Martial Squires were going to die soon, and that was certainly going to be a huge blow to the Martial Artist community, in their class conflict against states.

Still, he didn't care about such far-minded topics at the moment. All he wanted was to obtain the data that he had been pining for in order to clear the dungeon.

He watched with sharp alertness as the raid force entered the dungeon one by one, adopting an on-guard formation as they prepared themselves.

"Any preliminary sighting?" Captain Deacon asked.

"No, sir," One of the Martial Squires beside him replied as her eyes glowed. "I cannot detect a single monster as of yet."

Captain Deacon frowned, narrowing his eyes wordlessly. This was a little odd since they normally ran into monsters the second they entered floors.

They did not possess the stealth that Void Step gave Kane and Rui, thus they were always prepared to be attacked by monsters very soon after they entered the floor.

His scout, a powerful high-grade Martial Squire with complete mastery over multiple grade-nine sensory techniques usually spotted several of them even as they entered the dungeon. She was one of the extremely few Martial Squires who wasn't completely hampered to the normal sensory range that normal Martial Squires were normally restricted to. Her ability to travel the Shionel Dungeon without being completely hampered had earned her an extremely attractive contract with Deacon Industries. It was why she had willingly volunteered for the mission.

"This feels strange," She murmured. "I can vaguely sense movement and life in this dungeon, but I cannot sense anything in our immediate vicinity."

"Stay extremely alert at all times, got it?" Captain Deacon sternly instructed her. "I don't want any mistakes."

"Yes, captain,"

"Has the raid force completely boarded?"

"Just now, sir,"

He nodded, turning back as he approached extremely close to the raid force.

"My fellow adventurers!" He addressed all of them with a loud voice, amplified by his superhuman constitution. "We have arrived at the final floor of the Shionel Dungeon. We have arrived at the very foundation of this dungeon. This isn't our first rodeo. You know your roles. You know your positions. You know your duties. We will charge as a single cohesive unit into the heart of the floor, and we will not break apart. United we stand, divided we fall."

He nodded to all of them, before turning back towards the floor.

"CHARGE!!!" He bellowed loud enough for everyone to hear.

The entirety of the one-thousand-strong army rapidly began moving forward at an equal pace, which was quite impressive for Martial Squires. Speed varied to far greater among Martial Artists than it did among humans. Not even Usain Bolt could run ten times faster than the average human, but people like Kane were capable of such a feat. The specialization of superhuman prowess in Martial bodies as well as specialized Martial Art techniques that bore a great amount of affinity towards the user allowed for such vast disparities.

Thus getting a bunch of Martial Squires to charge forward at the same speed was a lot more difficult than doing the same for humans.

Suddenly, the scout Martial Artist shivered as an expression of horror sprung onto her face.

"Hm?" Captain Deacon noticed her reaction. "What is it, Fresca? What have you sensed?"

His words choked in his mouth as an overwhelming sense of pressure washed over him. His eyes widened as his sense of danger spiked.

"DEFEND!!!" He bellowed as he spread his arms wide, inhaling deeply before rapidly exhaling, clapping his arms together. "TEMPESTUAL WHIRLWIND SHIELD!"

A tremendous shockwave emerged expanding forward faster than the speed of sound.

Yet it did not get to expand unperturbed.

No.

A blindingly fast projectile blurred into vision, charging toward them.

BOOM!!!

An enormous explosion of wind ensued as Captain Deacon's wide area sound shield managed to negate the offensive impact of the attack, halting it in its tracks!

('Is that... a root?') His eyes widened. ('Are we fighting the dungeon itself?!')

He didn't even have time to gather his thoughts, for less than a millisecond later, the sense of danger elevated even further.

"STAND YOUR GROUND, WARRIORS!" He bellowed, trying to quash any collapse of morale. "WE ARE MARTIAL ARTISTS. WE ARE-!"

He choked on his words as something entered his field of vision, stunning him speechless.

An avalanche of roots crashed into them.

BOOM!!!!!!

Captain Deacon gritted his teeth with a furious expression as a titanically powerful attack crashed into him. Each root struck with the power of a grade-ten Martial Artist.

He did not possess the ability to protect all of his Martial Artist.

"ATTACK ATTACK ATTACK!!!" He bellowed. "CUT THESE ROOTS DOWN BEFORE THEY CUT US DOWN!"

He wasn't sure how many heard him. He wasn't sure how many were even still alive, but he had to hope. They were all high-grade Martial Artists, after all, they could withstand a few attacks peak-grade Squire-level attacks.

Another wave of roots washed over the entire group from all directions.

Captain Deacon gritted his teeth as he braced himself as eight roots chose to target him out of all people. He was the only one who could withstand the root attacks, being the sole grade-ten defensive Martial Squire in the entire group.

Yet before the roots could strike him, some happened.

A gigantic inferno intercepted the roots from the right. A man appeared to his left, deflecting them aside with his palm, while a woman simply caught roots approaching Chairman Deacon from the front with her body.

"Don't lose heart!" She told Captain Deacon. "We are not weak. We can lead our force to victory!"

The several grade-ten Martial Squires, who each protected him, nodded, steeling their expressions as they took their stances

Captain Deacon grinned, feeling a warm surge of will and euphoria emerge deep from within. "WE SHALL WIN!"

Chapter 939: Outcome

"Cough... Cough..." Captain Deacon spluttered blood as he panted deeply.

His body was a mess, riddled with deep wounds that refused to stop bleeding. His left eye was missing, causing him to take a stance that tilted his left side away. His Martial Art attire was completely torn, yet he didn't care. He stumbled as he moved forward.

Each step he took splashed around the blood that submerged his heels, produced by all the corpses around.

He glanced around him.

The grade-ten Martial Squires that had taken the lead of their wounded force in the battle against the Root were all dead.

One of them was flattened, while the other one was severed in half, the third one had been throttled away. Considering he never returned, Captain Deacon that he was dead too.

He was the only one left, half a day later.

The raid force had put up a brave fight, the grade-ten Martial Squires rallied the wounded Martial Artists into going all out against the roots. Hundreds of Martial Squires launched long-range attacks one by one as the close-range Martial Artists rushed forward. They mustered every ounce of power they could to resist the nightmare that the roots were.

The worst part wasn't that they were crushed in the end.

No.

The worst part was that they weren't crushed immediately.

The worst part was that they even made some progress, believing they could win.

Hoping they could win.

The worst part was when the roots allowed them to hope, before crushing it mercilessly, leaving behind nothing but despair.

Thousands of individual roots, each with the power and speed of grade-ten Martial Squires, crushed any and all resistance that the Martial Squires mustered up.

In the end, only he, the most invincible Martial Squire, survived.

Yet, he knew that it was just a matter of time. Yet, he didn't care.

No, that wasn't quite right.

He couldn't afford to care, for the sake of his sanity.

His heart ached as a Martial Artist, as a leader, as the son of his father for whom he was fighting.

His heart had collapsed into a bottomless pit of despair. He had sunk low not only because of his personal failures but because he knew that his personal failure would destroy everything his father had worked for.

His father's ambition to become guildmaster had begun more than a decade ago. He had sworn that he would do anything in his power to aid his father, who had raised him with love and faith, in achieving that goal.

Yet now, he had done the very opposite. He had gone and suffered the greatest failure in his career at the worst possible time he could possibly fathom.

Such a failure could not be hidden, and once his father's allies realized the sheer magnitude of the catastrophe that they had suffered by losing the Martial Squires that they had contributed to the raid, that his father was responsible for, their alliance would surely fracture!

Losing support just days before the elections was absolutely devastating. It was a political catastrophe of unprecedented detriment. It would cost Chairman Deacon the entirety of his political campaign, his one and only shot at becoming the guildmaster of the Shionel Merchant Guild.

He would rather die than look his father in the eye and tell him that his failure as a leader, as a Martial Squire, and as a son, was the reason that his life's greatest ambition had collapsed.

He froze as his father's image appeared in his mind.

His father was a hard ass, yet it was certain that he loved his children deeply, going to great lengths to facilitate their dreams and ambitions.

The thought of committing suicide just to avoid taking responsibility repulsed him. He owed it to his father to not kill himself because he was too weak to take responsibility for his failures.

He gritted his teeth, before turning around and heading for the exit.

BAM!!!

He gritted his teeth as he withstood a root attack pummeling him as he left. He had gotten a brief moment of respite when he had collapsed into the ground motionless, but as soon as he started moving properly again, the roots were relentless.

He persevered as he endured their attacks on his body. If not for the fact that his Martial Body had grown stronger over twenty years of growth, and the powerful grade-ten defensive technique that allowed him to endure much damage, he would not have managed to last this long.

A grade-ten defensive Martial Squire was not someone who could be put down as easily as the other grade-ten Martial Squires. Of course, they had inflicted far more damage than he had to the Root, they simply did not possess the ability to resist damage.

Yet just as he was escaping, a figure appeared before him out of nowhere.

SLASH

SPLAT!

A blade struck at his exposed neck, leaving a wound that splurged blood.

"To think that didn't kill you," Rui murmured from behind his mask. "Grade-ten Martial Squires sure are impressive, it makes sense that you managed to escape despite being blasted by the Root."

Captain Deacon covered his wound, desperately trying to close the wound. He glanced at the strange unknown Martial Squire before him with wary yet steely eyes.

How could this Martial Squire know his position?

How did he know that he had been enduring attacks from the roots?

Who was he?

His eyes widened as the answer came to him.

He had no proof.

Yet he had come to know, nonetheless.

"You..." He managed to squeeze out. "YOU D-"

SLASH

A second slash finished the job.

THUD

The captain's head collapsed to the ground, rolling away.

Rui turned towards the direction of the Root. He was still too far away to trigger its defense mechanisms.

"Not for long," Rui murmured as he stepped forward.

He was ready. Perhaps it was more prudent for him to wait, but he had already obtained everything he wanted and didn't feel the need to wait.

Chapter 940: Observations

Half a day earlier, Rui watched with excitement as the Deacon raid force clashed into a wave of roots.

Immediately, the Martial Squires of the raid force was overwhelmed suffering significant wounds. The only ones who were able to cleanly cope and handle the attacks were the grade-ten and grade-nine Martial Squires. Martial Squires weaker, unless defense-oriented, were simply unable to handle the sheer ferocity of the Root.

He couldn't help but admire Captain Deacon's defensive prowess.

"What a powerful large-scale defensive barrier," Rui murmured.

Such techniques definitely existed, just like there were large-scale offensive attacks, there were also large-scale defensive attacks of various kinds.

As the battle progressed, Rui couldn't help but admire Captain Deacon's prowess. He used multiple large-scale defensive techniques after defensive technique to protect his raid force as much as possible.

From barriers to suction breathing techniques that attracted all the attacks to himself which he withstood with his superior defensive prowess. He had done a lot for his fellow adventurers.

Rui definitely had to grant him that. Even if he did fail, he had exercised his duties as a leader quite well.

One of the biggest reasons that the raid force did not crumble immediately was because of the five grade-ten Martial Squires that had been assembled. Rui was quite impressed by all of them.

He even recognized one of them. "Squire Fren..."

He remembered her, she was the leader of Party Saberstrike that was part of the Voidhunter squad. Her team members had gotten annihilated by Guildmaster Bradt's well-timed and placed assassins, with some assistance from Kane. She had denounced Chairman Deacon, but it seemed as though Chairman Deacon had managed to rope her back.

Her grappling techniques were as powerful as ever, as she impressively caught root attacks with her arms, stopping them on the spot with sheer force.

The others were also quite eye-drawing. One of them was a powerful heat-oriented Martial Artist, something that he hadn't come across in a long time. He thought back to one of the Martial Apprentices from nearly six years ago in the Martial Contest. She too had a flame-oriented Martial Art, even if she was more than a thousand times weaker than the grade-ten Martial Artist that Rui was witnessing fight against the Root.

Still, as much attention Rui paid to the Martial Artists, he paid even more attention to the Root as he mentally recorded everything in his Mind Palace.

The Root's active patterns came to life as the Root encountered a force that it wasn't able to crush in an instant.

Rui stared hard as he reaped the fruits of their labor

"The roots do not initiate an attack within ten meters of their target," Rui murmured excitedly as he noticed the first active pattern of the battle!

He noticed that every time a root attacked a target, it attacked from a distance greater than ten meters.

This by itself did not prove that the Root never attacked from less than ten meters away, but what did prove it is when the roots moved away from the target when it was less than ten meters away, and then charged back in after reaching ten meters away from the target.

This indicated that there was an unwillingness programmed into the defensive mechanism to attack from less than ten meters.

('Probably to have enough distance to charge enough momentum,') Rui's widened.

This meant that dodging Roots was highly effective against them!

The fight was just getting started, and Rui couldn't help but grow excited. Just this one pattern alone changed the game. He instantly felt a lot less uncertain about how he was going to deal with the offense of the Root.

As time passed, the Root began overwhelming the raid force, revealing even more active patterns in its movements and attacks.

('It has zero defensive concerns despite this whole thing being a defensive mechanism,') Rui realized. ('It acts as though it cannot get hurt, and rushes forward even if the root is extremely damaged.')

Another thing he noticed was highly critical in aiding his understanding. The grade ten and other high-grade Martial Artists had destroyed several roots of their stumps, yet Rui noticed that the stumps of the roots kept moving as though the roots were still attached to them,

('It doesn't realize that the roots are destroyed?') His eyes widened. ('The Root continues moving them as though they are intact!')

That revealed a lot about the nature of the Root.

Firstly, it did not possess sentience or self-awareness. It did not possess an instinct for self-preservation. The defense mechanism that it had was highly primitive and resembled a programmed bot, rather than a sentient being.

That gave Rui a lot more confidence that his method of taking the Root down would work, given what he had learned from the battle already.

That wasn't the only extent of what he was learning from the battle, because each Martial Art was unique, Rui got a wide array of empirical data surrounding how the Root handled them, and how effective certain approaches were against the Root in certain respects.

Some Martial Artists were able to cope remarkably well relative to their grade, while other higher-grade Martial Artists seemed almost entirely useless despite being higher in grade.

Poison Martial Artists seemed almost impotent relative to the Root as if they weren't even Martial Artists in the first place!

The physiology of the monsterified roots was too different from the norm, and the mechanisms by which the poisons produced by the Martial bodies and techniques of poison-oriented Martial Artists were simply ineffective against the roots seemingly.

The fight progressed as Rui gathered more information on all these traits as his predictive model began taking on a more distinctive shape and form, solidifying by the second. At this rate, it wouldn't be too long before he was ready to accomplish what he had initially set out to accomplish, the whole reason he had gone through the efforts of setting all of this up.