

Martial Unity 951

Chapter 951: Rui Quarrier

The effects of one thousand Martial Squires dying was not small, and it rippled across the entirety of the Shionel Confederation.

Even as the elections arrived, Chairman Deacon spent his days placating the voters that he had already bought, doing everything he could in his power.

In order to not lose many of the most disaffected allies by his side, he needed to bleed capital, truly draining himself to keep them from denouncing supporting him.

However, he wasn't entirely successful, the number of allies on his side, both domestic and international, that had denounced was not insignificant.

Even if many of them weren't merchants who could vote, he had used their capital to buy many other voters.

For example, he used the support of many foreign and international nations to get better deals for entire sectors of merchants in the Shionel Confederation in exchange for their votes. Now, some of those deals were compromised by the national stakeholders withdrawing their support.

He desperately tried to fix all his problems by throwing more money and capital at them, while also compromising more and making even more promises to disgruntled voters.

Eventually, the three days of voting came to an end, and the votes were counted by the electoral committee of the Shionel Merchant Guild before the results were eventually announced and published.

[#1: Bradt Patrick: 428695 votes.

#2: Deacon Vernes: 427989 votes.

...]

Guildmaster Bradt had just barely managed to secure a win!

The part that shocked and excited everyone was how close Guildmaster Bradt and Chairman Deacon were, the former was less than one thousand votes ahead of the latter!

Although the layman didn't understand what that meant, those who possessed greater access to information and greater insight realized what this meant.

Chairman Deacon may very well have won if not for the massacre of the one thousand Martial Squires associated with Deacon Industries.

Of course, this wasn't the only factor. Guildmaster Bradt had exposed a trump card shortly prior to the elections. The trump card that he had been saving for quite some time.

The announcement of a single Shionel Dungeon map that covered the entire Shionel Dungeon had impressed the entire nation. But it was the merchants who were most shocked by this announcement from the Bradt Distribution Service.

The many clever merchants of the Shionel Merchant Guild had understood what the announcement meant.

It was Guildmaster Bradt fighting back with a well-prepared trump card to counter all of the titanic support that Chairman Bradt had amassed. It was just as powerful as a bargaining chip as the crushing of the Voider.

Rui had inadvertently become the core of both Chairman Deacon and Guildmaster Bradt's campaigning trump cards!

The map that he had almost fully completed for Guildmaster Bradt had served as a riveting turnaround that bought back much of the support that Chairman Deacon had stolen from him.

That, in combination, with the devastating loss that Chairman Deacon had suffered had tipped the balance, allowing Guildmaster Bradt to narrowly edge out a victory.

THUD

"DAMN IT!!!" Chairman Deacon struck his fists on his table as he continued banging them. "GOD DAMN IT ALL!!!!!"

He screeched, venting all of the emotions that he had bottled up recently. He clutched his hair as he breathed hard, and unsteadily. His eyes were bloodshot, and there were dark bags under his eyes. He felt as though he was going to break, mentally, even if not physically.

All the effort that he had put in the last two years had been in vain. Not only had they been in vain, but they were also detrimental since he had truly gone out on a limb with the measures that he had taken to win the elections.

It meant that he was in quite the low, lower than he had been in the past ten years. He felt as though his heart was literally burning with the death of his son, and now the death of his ambitions to become guildmaster.

"Sir!" His secretary walked in.

He didn't even deign to respond.

"Sir I just received a report from the analytics team that you put into investigating the Voider based on the intelligence that Squire Yuna provided," She told him.

That earned his attention.

His hatred for the Voider had not waned.

No.

It had only grown.

"What is it?" He growled with narrow sharp eyes.

"The prevailing hypothesis was that the Voider was a Martial Senior capable of hiding his power, thus not triggering the alarms of the Shionel Dungeon, and thus being the sole Martial Senior capable of exploring the Shionel Dungeon. It would explain the sheer amount of success and dominance that the Voider has displayed in the Shionel Dungeon, and many other oddities."

Chairman Deacon had also come to suspect that the Voider was a Martial Senior when Squire Yuna described a Senior level aura of a Martial Artist assaulting her, it would explain how the Voider could handle one thousand roots that wiped away one thousand Martial Squires by his lone self.

It made taking him down much harder. Martial Seniors were not disposable, deploying them for anything that needed to be done after careful consideration. Killing a Martial Senior was an extremely risky and taxing mission. He either needed to commit a painfully costly amount of militaristic capital or deploy other Martial Seniors, which could not be done lightly for a smaller nation like the Shionel Confederation.

"However, the analytics team has come up with an alternative possibility, and this possibility has been deemed to be of a remarkably high probability," She reported.

"What is it?" He furrowed his eyebrows.

His secretary pulled out a document, placing it on his table wordlessly. Chairman Deacon frowned at the solemn air that had taken hold as he reached for the document, opening and reading it.

His eyes widened in time as he read through the analysis and report carefully, his hands quivered in shock as he swept through the pages of the report one by one.

"Rui... Quarrier?"

Chapter 952: Considerations

Rui and Kane had decided to proceed with absolute caution. They abandoned their inn and all the belongings in it permanently. Rui had decided that it was simply not worth returning anywhere near that inn.

Most of the time they traveled via Void Step, otherwise, they had retreated to one of the safehouses of the Martial Union for now.

"Have you considered our offer?" Commissioner Reze asked, throwing a pointed look toward Rui.

Rui didn't respond immediately.

Some time ago, Commissioner Reze had made an offer to Rui in the event that his identity was revealed. An offer to protect him and his family from the Underworld and Chairman Deacon, as well as the various foreign and international forces that Rui had pissed off.

In return, Rui was to become an internal member of the Martial Union and offer complete subordination to the Martial Union.

Rui was not stupid, he knew that the consequences of having his identity exposed were not something he could handle by himself.

There was no Martial Art technique project he could embark on that would allow him to handle being targeted by so many powerful forces and nations. Not at the Squire level, at least.

As a Martial Squire, he simply was powerless against too many forces.

('I need to grow stronger,') He sighed inwardly.

But until he was strong enough, he had a storm looming on the horizon that could hit him and the people he cared about the most at any moment. Martial Commissioner Reze offered him the protection of the Martial Union.

Rui couldn't dismiss the offer lightly.

The Martial Union truly possessed the power to protect him from the many forces that had a bone to pick with Rui. Even if there were other forces of similar power, such as the four powerhouse nations, none of them would pursue him if he was under the protection of the Martial Union.

It was not worth it. Although Rui certainly had pissed them off by depriving them of success in the Shionel Dungeon, he was not worth provoking a war over against the Martial Union and Kandrian Empire. Especially when he was no longer relevant since the Shionel Dungeon was basically cleared at this stage.

However, in return, he would basically have to come a few steps short of becoming a slave of the Martial Union.

Although Commissioner Reze had not phrased it this way, Rui was not a fool. He knew that accepting this deal meant that the Martial Union would have a ton of power over his life.

He was not eager to accept this arrangement. Especially after his time in his latest venture in the Shionel Confederation. He had grown to like his autonomy and freedom far too much. There were little to no detriments to adopting such a lifestyle, and the number of factors that aimed to control his life were few.

He had been satisfied with missions prior, but now that he had experienced what growing stronger for his own ambitions and goals was like, he felt missions were incredibly bland and boring. In fact, he never wanted to return to completing elementary missions again.

Ideally, he would like to undertake ambitions that were extremely difficult that could also earn him money by providing viable service to society.

Of course, with the latest amount of revenue that Rui had earned from the Shionel Dungeon, he was basically a billionaire of the Panama Continent. Thus he could forget about the monetary aspects and focus on his Martial Art and Martial Path.

It broke him from shackles that he hadn't even noticed before. It was an intoxicating feeling. That was why he revulsed at the idea of being a slave to the Martial Union with every fiber of his being.

Of course, it wasn't that he thought that the Martial Union would abuse him or act against his interests. It was in the Martial Union's interests that an extraordinarily brilliant Martial Squire as promising as Rui grew to actualize all of his massive potential to become stronger and thus become a greater asset to the Martial Union.

It was quite likely that the Martial Union would be quite careful with how they treated Rui. They did not want to give him a reason to hate them otherwise he would no longer be on their side once he grew powerful enough.

"I... won't accept your deal," Rui shook his head. "That's not who I am, not back then, and certainly not now. However, I do appreciate the offer, and the acknowledgment of my value and potential to be willing to go that far for my family. However, I cannot accept that offer."

Commissioner Reze stared at Rui deeply for several seconds before nodding. "If that's the decision you have made, then the Martial Union will respect that decision and honor it. We just hope you don't come to regret this decision.

Rui nodded. "I have been making preparations to move all my revenue from the anonymous holdings account in the Shionel Confederation to the Kandrian Empire, I will be needing the Martial Union to help me smuggle it past the borders. Once that's done, we can cleanly disengage with the Shionel Confederation, especially now that the elections have ended in the Shionel Confederation."

Rui was quite relieved that Chairman Deacon had lost the elections. It would have made Rui's life far harder if he got into office and was able to wield the might of the Shionel Confederation as a sovereign state to systematically hunt down the Voider. Thus far, Chairman Deacon had applied his power and the capital of Deacon Industries and its allies into looking into Rui.

But it would be a whole different ballgame if the entire state and its various executive departments were doing their best to find Rui.

For now, he was content with not making any radical decisions as he cautiously detached from the nation and left like a ghost.

For now, he was a lot more confident that he ought to be able to avoid any repercussions.

Or so he hoped.

Chapter 953: Find Him

"Rui... Quarrier?"

Chairman Deacon stared at the document containing a profile of a young Martial Squire with pitch-black hair and eyes.

At that moment, he felt a deep instinct stirring inside him.

"Yes, sir," His secretary nodded. "He's a B-rank Martial Squire residing in the Shionel Confederation, with average success with the dungeon. Nothing too spectacular. But he is the one who won the war over the core of the Serevian Dungeon for the Kandrian Empire. The intelligence that our intelligence department dug up on him deeply indicated that he does possess the ability to project an aura that is characteristic of Martial Artists of a higher Realm. That is actually how the intelligence department found him, rather. By investigating the possibility of a Martial Squire responsible for the Senior-level aura that Squire Yuna sensed. Since then oddities have piled, such as the confirmed locations of the Martial Squires in the Shionel Confederation at the estimated time period that the Voider was on the final floor. Many names get cut. However, we were unable to locate him or his partner Kane during this time period, or at all, they haven't returned to their inn yet. Also-"

"Wait a minute..." Chairman Deacon's eyes widened. "I... remember him. Yes. He was a Voidhunter. One of the only four to survive."

Chairman Deacon managed to remember his distinct features.

"Yes sir," His secretary nodded. "The duo serving as the Voider has been found to match the data on the Voider obtained on the sixteenth floor where a glimpse of them was obtained. Multiple individuals serving as the Voider together is the trait that disqualified the theory of the Voider being a Senior. Also, the fact that the Voider waited for the raid force to clear the sixteenth floor disqualifies them from being a Senior, since Senior would have been able to destroy the tree as a whole with a single attack."

"That makes sense..." Chairman Deacon nodded, bewildered. "On top of that, there is the fact that the Martial Union withdrew its forces from the raid force sent to the final floor!"

His expression was saturated with raw unadulterated shock.

The Kandrian Martial Union was in on it!

He could think of no other explanation for why the Martial Union would refuse to partake in the clearing of the final floor of the Shionel Dungeon. It made no sense. The only reason their otherwise inscrutable decision made sense was if they knew that deploying their internal Martial Squires on that operation would get them all killed

In hindsight, it as absolutely clear that the Martial Union possessed foreknowledge of the disaster that was following through. He didn't know exactly what kind of working relationship Rui and the Martial Union had, but it was clear that they were working together.

He gritted his teeth as his expression morphed into one of deep hatred and fury. His secretary felt the hair on her body standing on edge at the sheer sight of him.

He glanced back at Rui's photo, closing his eyes as he did his best to recall the interactions he had with him.

He could barely remember anything. It couldn't be helped. Individual Martial Squires were a dime a dozen at his level of power. Grade-ten Martial Squires were worthy of more consideration, but even then, they were more valuable disposable pawns.

Yet for some reason, even though he didn't remember the words Rui exchanged with him, he recalled the impression that Rui had left on him.

He had actually spent some time talking to Rui because the young man had made a subtle yet profound impression, he was highly intelligent and pertinent. He had a bright mind, and there was more to him than met the eye.

He opened his eyes.

He already knew. "It's him."

There was unyielding certainty in his chilly voice. His eyes narrowed as his eyes blazed with fury and rage. "Find him."

The secretary did not think it was a good idea to do anything rash without gaining absolute confirmation that they were the Voider. However, she knew that he was not going to change his mind. He would most likely gain more explicit proof after the two Martial Squires had been caught and interrogated.

"Should I inform the alliance?" She asked.

"No," He shook his head. "The Martial Union is a traitor to the alliance, but kicking them out will tip them off. Do it using the capital and resources of Deacon Industries. Task the entirety of the Intelligence Department on the search of Rui Quarrier and Kane Arrancar."

"Yes sir," She bowed.

"Oh... One more thing," He paused. "Do a more extensive background check. Families and friends, I want a list of all of them. They can be of use."

"Yes, sir," She nodded, before leaving the room.

Chairman Deacon put aside the matter of cleaning up the mess that was still around due to his loss in the elections. At this moment, he was fully invested in the matter of the Voider. He would do everything in his power to find and kill him.

"No, I'm going to torture him for stabbing my son in the back," He gritted his teeth as his nails drew blood from being clenched into his fist too hard. "I'm going to kill his entire family before his very eyes."

He didn't bother about making the same claim for Kane. He recognized the latter's last name quickly and knew that he could not dream about trying to make his family suffer even if he was guildmaster.

('Speaking of guildmaster...') His eyes narrowed. ('Does Bradt know...?')

He got the feeling that he hadn't known this entire time, for certain things would have gone differently. He knew his enemy well and knew that the man would never treat any Martial Squire as an equal. However, if he was working with someone who was anonymous and kept himself safe from Bradt's power, then he could understand why Rui wasn't firmly locked in the guildmaster's palm and power.

Chapter 954: Tips

"Remind me why we spent an entire day in advance for this meeting?" Kane sighed, crouching.

"To make sure that they aren't setting up a trap," Rui replied.

The two of them were waiting inside a tunnel, near the entrance to it from outside the Shionel Dungeon. They had simply stepped a few meters into the dungeon after entering it. They had even blocked off the tunnel to ensure that nobody would enter it and run into them.

Kane was bored, while Rui simply kept watch over a certain office branch of the Adventurer Guild near the Shionel Dungeon.

As a caveat for the potential security holes that existed, it was stipulated into law that the withdrawal of large sums of money required the verification and monitoring of individuals with a certain level of authority or above.

That meant that Rui could not walk into the Shionel Merchant Guild, and simply extract all the money that he wanted and leave. That was why he hadn't already withdrawn all of his revenue and run away from the Shionel Confederation.

He had set up a meeting with Guildmaster Bradt, the only person who he was willing to engage with from the Merchant Guild over the matter.

He and Kane had immediately perched themselves outside the meeting spot to make sure that Guildmaster Bradt didn't set anything up as a trap before the meeting.

Not that Rui believed that Guildmaster Bradt would try something of the sort. Rui had already shown that when he was near the Shionel Dungeon he was always holding a powerful bomb in his hands that could do a lot of damage.

Furthermore, they both had enough to gain from finally completing their long-drawn agreement and cooperation and would like to see a clean break where they had nothing to do with each other now.

"Alright, it's time," Rui nodded as he pushed aside the boulder, opening up the path to outside the Shionel Dungeon. "I'll meet you after."

"Gotcha, bye," Kane waved him away.

Rui walked over to the branch, crossing the large gate that separated the Shionel Dungeon from the inner ring of the Adventurer Ring town, quickly heading over to the Adventurer Guild branch where he had insisted to hold the meeting.

The two Martial Squires guards that stood outside simply nodded wordlessly at him when he arrived there, leading him inside.

The branch was emptied out, for the meeting specifically, Rui supposed.

What surprised him was that this time, Guildmaster Bradt had chosen to arrive physically, rather than through the projection like last time.

However, he was guarded to the tooth with grade-ten Martial Squires. Rui sensed that they were watching his every move like a hawk, they would not allow him to harm so many grade-ten Martial Squires standing right around him while there was some distance between him and the guildmaster.

"Finally," Guildmaster Bradt greeted him with a nod. "We meet in person."

Rui had to admit that Guildmaster Bradt possessed a greater presence in real life than he did through a projection. The man somehow drew more attention from Rui than his impressive Martial Squire guards did. That was what impressed Rui, the man exerted a lot of presence on Rui despite not being a Martial Artists or a physical threat to Rui.

It seemed that Rui's instincts could sense the sheer amount of indirect pressure that the man possessed. He possessed more than enough power to get Rui killed.

Especially considering that he was the guildmaster for the next four years of the Shionel Confederation.

"Indeed, congratulations on being elected guildmaster, Guildmaster Bradt," Rui offered a perfunctory greeting.

Guildmaster Bradt nodded. "I'd like to get things over with quickly."

"Of course," Rui nodded. "I'd like to confirm the presence of the statement."

Guildmaster Bradt waved his hand and one of his subordinates placed a document on the table, pushing it to Rui.

Rui opened the sheer, reading an official-looking paper with the seal of the Shionel Merchant Guild, and Guildmaster Bradt's own signature at the very bottom.

The statement declared that any bearer of the sheet of paper was entitled to a net sum of money that Rui was withdrawing from the account. Thus, Rui could essentially treat it as a cheque. Rui intended to pass it through the Martial Union before it was deposited into his own bank account. This way he could protect his own identity.

Rui nodded, turning back to Guildmaster Bradt.

The man immediately replied. "Now, complete your end of the bargain fully, after all this time.

Rui nodded, before pulling out three books and dropping them on the table. Guildmaster Bradt's eyes lit up as he opened each book, unfolding it one after the other. "Ah... The final and completed map of the Shionel Dungeon."

Rui had spent a day or two drawing out the full map of the Shionel Dungeon, it grew to be more of a pain every time he did it since he needed to draw whole new maps with updated pathways.

With this, their exchange and contract were over. Guildmaster Bradt had finally gotten what he wanted this entire time; the complete map to the entirety of the Shionel Dungeon. With this, he would be able to go ahead and convert the Shionel Dungeon into his exclusive distribution kingdom once he commenced his plans of commercializing and commodifying the Shionel Dungeon. The Bradt Distribution Service would soon enter its golden era once he successfully implemented this, in the same manner, that Chairman Deacon had entered his golden era during the exploration of the Shionel Dungeon.

"This...?" Guildmaster Bradt frowned as he reached the bottom of the Shionel Dungeon on the map.

"Ah, that's the final floor of the Shionel Dungeon," Rui nodded. "I cleared it but didn't care to mine all the esoteric ore deposits. I would suggest you get to it before Chairman Deacon does."

Rui would rather see Guildmaster Bradt get it than Chairman Deacon.

"I appreciate the tip," Guildmaster Bradt nodded. "Allow me to repay the favor."

"Hm?"

"You're not as well-hidden as you'd like, Rui Quarrier."

Chapter 955: Deal

Had it not been for the micro-expression control that he had been trained in, as well as the Mind Mask that he had put on, Rui didn't think he would have been able to remain as composed as he appeared to be.

He remained silent as he tried his best to maintain his calm and exposure, simply staring at Guildmaster Bradt from behind his esoteric ore-stuffed suit.

"Not so much as a twitch, hm?" Guildmaster Bradt mused. "Remarkable, you're not like the other Martial Artists, but I suppose that's just preaching to the choir at this point, given the series of impossible feats you've pulled off."

Rui stared at him, refusing to utter a word. There had to be a point to bringing this up.

"More importantly, believe it or not, I didn't discover your identity by myself. I actually stole it from a good old friend of mine, a few hours ago,"

Rui's eyes narrowed.

"Someone you're familiar with, Chairman Deacon," Guildmaster Bradt informed him. "He has launched his entire intelligence department into a highly secretive investigation against you, and your little friend."

Rui struggled to maintain his composure as he reeled from the impact of what Guildmaster Bradt had just told him. Chairman Deacon had already discovered his identity?!

Rui furiously thought about the means by which his identity was revealed, realizing that being exposed at the Root floor had probably been the tipping point, allowing the investigation to reach him.

An immense amount of anxiety was born in his heart.

His worst fears had come true!

Now that Chairman Deacon was confirmed to know of his identity, the game had entirely changed. He desperately needed protection, not just for himself, but also for his family, especially for his family.

('Shit!') He cursed as he realized how much trouble he was in. It wasn't that he couldn't think of any way to protect his family, he just was deeply unwilling to pay the price that the Martial Union demanded from him.

Yet, at the same time, he couldn't leave his family hanging. He loved them far too much to be able to not take great measures to protect them. But at the same time, he couldn't shackle himself. He simply couldn't

('I need another solution!') He realized, returning his attention to Guildmaster Bradt.

Although Rui hadn't said a word to him, his silence was deafening.

His senses, in addition to logical deduction, told him that Guildmaster Bradt was telling the truth at the moment. Lying to Rui, with all of his senses and understanding of patterns was almost impossible. On top of that, Rui knew that he had no reason to lie, and every reason to tell the truth. Chairman Deacon knew that Rui had a connection to the Kandrian Empire, the Martial Union specifically, it would be trivially easy for Rui to disprove his words if they were false.

On top of that, it was in Guildmaster Bradt's interest that Rui didn't get caught. For Rui still possessed the map that he had given him. That map was most valuable to him when he was the only one who had received it from Rui. The more people got their hands on it, the less it was an advantage. He did not want to see Chairman Deacon get his hands on the map.

Ideally, he would like to kill Rui himself, but in the course of their interactions, Rui had proven to be far too careful to allow for any opening. He couldn't even manage to tag Rui with a highly detectable gas inside the dungeon, which showed careful he was.

Furthermore, Rui never refused to meet anywhere else except extremely close to the Shionel Dungeon, which was no different from his natural guardian at this point. He couldn't touch Rui even if he brought an army with him. Rui could do far too much damage, it wasn't worth it.

As soon as he had discovered Rui's identity a few hours ago when his most entrenched spies deep inside Deacon's staff had managed to come across the intelligence. He had immediately conducted furtive surveillance for him and had been unable to find him anywhere, including the inn in which he resided.

Rui's mind was in a mess at the moment. Even with all his rationality, he struggled to know what to do in this situation. Even for Rui, it wasn't easy being able to come to a decision immediately. He had been thrust into a crisis that was unlike any that he had ever dealt with before in either of his two previous lives, the sheer unfamiliarity of his circumstances with the high stakes and painful dilemmas almost drove him into a panic.

Almost.

He breathed in deeply as he calmed his mind down.

"Well," Guildmaster Bradt abruptly broke the silence. "Good luck."

He got up, yet even before he could take a step.

"Wait," Rui finally uttered a word after what he had revealed to him.

The man simply stared at Rui wordlessly.

"I would like to offer you a deal," Rui narrowed his eyes behind his full-body suit. "I need your help and I'm willing to compensate you handsomely."

Rui waved his cheque statement before Guildmaster Bradt.

He knew that he couldn't hold back with money, he needed to use every ounce of capital he had in order to ensure that this crisis didn't take the worst turn. That included using the seven-point-four billion Shionel gold coins that he had earned from all of his ventures in the Shionel. He had no qualms about using all of it as a germ of an idea formed in his head.

He would not allow his family to come under harm.

But at the same time, he would not displace his life into subordination by agreeing to the Martial Union's offer. He could not stand doing that, and would rather die.

"Oh?" Guildmaster Bradt raised an eyebrow with interest, curious about what Rui had to offer. Although the man had certainly been caught off-guard by news that he had heard less than a minute ago.

Chapter 956: Choice

Rui left the office a few hours later rushing towards the dungeon as fast as he could, entering a tunnel.

"Finally!" Kane sighed. "What took you so long? I thought it was supposed to be a simple final transaction."

"The situation has changed," Rui narrowed his eyes. "Guildmaster Bradt knew of our identities."

Kane's eyes widened as his expression morphed into one of shock. "WHAT?!"

"It's true," Rui nodded grimly. "He even shared the source of his information which was through his sources in Deacon's staff, just a few hours ago. This means that Chairman Deacon also knows, most likely extremely recently. He knows who we are, and we're in extreme danger."

Kane just stepped away as he stared at the ground with a dropped jaw. "We're so dead."

"No, we're going to make it outta here alive," Rui put a hand on his shoulder, shaking him as he reassured him. "Regardless, this is my fault."

He sighed. "If I had been more insightful and careful, I might have been able to prevent this from happening. No, perhaps taking on so much in the first place was a mistake."

Kane shook his head. "I knew the risks of what we were signing up for after our first shocking success. You even asked me back then if I was still willing to continue despite the risks and stakes, and I said yes, knowing full well that you and I were going to create a storm. I'm not saying you're wrong, but at the end of the day, I always knew this was one possible outcome, and it did end up happening."

He smirked wryly. "If we do die, it's been a fun ride. At least we can go down knowing that we made a mess of an entire country."

He shrugged.

Rui couldn't help but appreciate Kane a lot at this moment. He could have chosen to blame Rui for everything, and he had the right to since Rui was responsible for the catastrophe, even if he had been scrupulously careful and insightful about the way he went about the safety and security measures. The fact that they went nearly a year being effectively the most wanted Martial Squires anywhere in that little of the Panama Continent, and nobody had any inkling of who they were despite them being under everyone's nose was an absolutely unbelievable feat.

Kane knew that if he had let any other Martial Squire take Rui's place, including himself, they would have been caught and killed in the very first week of the Shionel Confederation. It was only through Rui's extraordinary insight and competence that they were able to survive an entire year under the scrutiny of countless powerful forces.

However, in the end, it turned out that not even he could avoid making a mistake, or a sub-optimal decision.

"Still, that doesn't mean I'd rather die than not if we have a choice," Kane turned towards him with a look of determination.

Rui nodded. "Don't worry, I'll get us out of this mess, I promise."

"So, what's the plan?" Kane asked with an expectant look towards Rui. Knowing him, he had probably already thought of a dozen plans and had begun filtering them by how optimal they were, and their probability of success.

He wasn't wrong.

"Before I answer that," Rui paused, turning towards Kane with a solemn expression. "Kane, are you willing to cut all ties with everyone that you have ever known in order to get out of this?"

Kane's eyes widened at that question, it meant that Rui was seriously considering the ramifications of the plan that he was considering, and they didn't seem small.

Much to Rui's surprise, Kane did not immediately agree.

Then he felt bad for expecting Kane to immediately agree, it made him feel entitled. But given how suffocating Kane felt in the Kandrian Empire, he was surprised Kane did not jump at the question.

He made an uneasy expression. "Almost everybody... Out friends... Fae..."

Rui raised an eyebrow. He realized that perhaps he did not possess the full picture of Kane's relationship with some of their mutual friends, especially Fae.

He almost couldn't believe that the two had gotten close, given how much they used to bicker back when they were kids in the Academy. It turned out he didn't understand how they had come to feel about each other.

Although, he did recall Fae telling him about spending time with Kane when he spoke to her after she became a Martial Squire.

"It's fine if you want to stay with her... You can," Rui wisely did not opt for poking fun to some attempt to lighten the situation. "I want to make sure I'm not pressuring you into anything."

Kane turned towards Rui. "Are you willing to cut away everything?"

He knew that he was trying to have his cake and eat it, but he wanted to make sure that he understood everything that Rui had in mind before he made a decision about anything. Depending on how it went, maybe there was still a way to maintain correspondence with everything that was going on.

He wasn't too hopeful of that, however. Considering that Rui had even chosen to ask him such a serious question meant that the situation was quite bad and the most effective solutions to the crisis required such extreme sacrifices. He didn't think he would be able to find a way to avoid it if Rui couldn't.

"Yes," Rui said with unyielding determination.

Kane's eyes widened at his unhesitating answer. He knew that everything Rui loved and cared about it was in the Kandrian Empire, thus he knew how painful that choice must have been.

"It hurts, but it's my fault, so I need to suck it up. Better I suffer than the people I care about, that is why I'm willing to make this choice," Rui steeled his expression. "Now what about you, Kane? I'll respect your choice either way, and I'll help you avoid this crisis. But we don't have any time whatsoever."

Chapter 957: Commission

Listening to the sacrifices that Rui was willing to make to ensure the consequences of his mistakes didn't hurt the people he cared about made Kane feel a little immature.

"Alright, I'm in," Kane told him, ironing his resolve. "What's your plan?"

"We need to get in contact with Commissioner Reze immediately," Rui replied. "There's no time to waste, I'll tell you all about it on the way."

Kane nodded.

The two of them left the dungeon, using Void Step as they headed towards the little base that the Martial Union ran. Unfortunately, they couldn't just waltz into the regional Martial Union branch office just like that. Rui knew that Chairman Deacon was probably watching every publically registered site connected to the Martial Union with a hawk, he had probably deployed many Martial Squires, perhaps even Martial Seniors on watch.

The two of them hurried, eventually making their way to the location.

"That's... a bold plan," Kane murmured when Rui finished explaining. "Are you really willing to do that to yourself? You will suffer. Your family is not exempt from the pain this plan will inflict on them. Isn't it better to just accept Commissioner Reze's deal?"

STEP

They reached the ground as they reached their destination.

"I... cannot. My Martial Path, my way of life is too important to me," Rui squeezed out with a grim expression, as he clenched his fist hard, drawing blood with his nails. "This means everything to me."

Kane could clearly see that the decision to go through with the plan was painful for him.

Rui stepped forward and he knocked on the door in a particular pattern. The door opened as a man ushered them in.

"Squire Quarrier, Squire Kane," The manager of the little secret drop-off base. "Please come this way to make the drop."

"We're not here to deliver esoteric ore deposits. We need to get in touch with Commissioner Reze urgently," Rui explained.

The manager nodded. "We can arrange for an appointment like always."

"We need to speak with him right now," Rui urged him. "It's of absolute vital importance and extremely urgent."

The man frowned. "I'm afraid that is not really appropriate."

"I strongly insist!" Rui raised his voice a little, exerting a little pressure on the man. He disliked doing this on normal people who hadn't done anything to deserve it, but he didn't have time and he couldn't afford to waste time.

"Let me see what can be done," The man winced, raising his hands. "I shall inform Commissioner Reze of your urgent need to meet him. If he deems to accept it, he may choose to agree to remotely contact you at the moment."

"Thank you,"

Five minutes later, the two of them sat before Commissioner Reze.

"Squire Quarrier," Commissioner Reze addressed him. "I deemed your urgency as a justified reason to employ this highly secure, but costly and limited means of communication. What is the matter that you wanted to meet with me over that was so urgent?"

"I wish to purchase covert protection from Senior-level threats for as long as it is possible to purchase with six billion Shionel gold coins," Rui explained. "I'll pay the full price for it right here and now, and I want the highest level of official guarantee that the Martial Union can provide that the contract will be honored even in the case of my death."

Commissioner Reze's eyes narrowed at those words. "Squire Quarrier, what exactly has happened?"

"Before I explain everything," Rui told him. "I need this transaction to occur as soon as possible. I'm willing to pay whatever fees needed to speed up the process and ensure that it comes into effect immediately."

The man stared deeply at Rui for a few seconds before nodding. "Alright, the Martial Union accepts your commission. Fill out the form, and I will ensure that it is instantly put into effect, but it will cost you dearly since the fee is measured as a solid proportion of the total cost, so in this case, billions. Billions in order to obtain maximum expedition Are you willing to pay that price?"

"Yes," Rui nodded.

"Alright then," He nodded. "You will have to fill out the form though, nothing can be done before that."

Rui nodded, and soon enough he was given a form which he promptly filled out as fast as he could. Thankfully things weren't all that complicated, thus it was relatively easy. He did not want to waste even a single minute. The more time passed, the greater the probability that his family would incur a catastrophe. He did not want to destroy their lives because he was too slow!

"Done!" He declared, wiping a bead of sweat from his forehead. "And I have the cheque here."

Commissioner Reze nodded. "Alright, have it scanned, and once it's sent to me, I will immediately expedite the process and deploy Martial Artists needed to protect your family to the degree that you have purchased."

"How long will the protection last with the sum that I have purchased with six billion Shionel gold coins last?" Rui asked.

"No more than ten years," Commissioner Reze stroked his chin.

Rui cocked his head back, surprised. "It's six billion gold coins!"

Six billion gold coins were a million times above what he had earned from basic Squire-level missions, even if Senior-level missions were one thousand times more expensive than Squire-level missions, it was still enough to commission thousands of Senior-level missions!

"Covert protection is vastly more expensive than standard protection," Commissioner Reze explained. "Open protection also borrows the implicit protection of the Martial Union. Covert protection does not."

Rui immediately understood what Commissioner Reze meant. Open protection from the Martial Union deterred a lot of people from even thinking of attacking the target. But covert protection did not have that, and thus could not deter anybody ahead of time. It also required more protection because the protection needed to happen without the target's awareness.

Still, Rui was willing to endure the cost if it meant that their daily lives would not be disrupted.

Chapter 958: Intention

"Fine," Rui sighed. "I accept the deal."

He didn't have much leverage beyond that. Regardless, he knew that six billion Shionel gold coins were not trivial, even for the Martial Union. The resulting protection wouldn't be trivial, either. He did not think that anybody would be willing to go as far as to surpass the limits of the protection that he had bought for his family.

After all, one would need to go as far as deploying Martial Masters to overcome the protection that Rui had purchased for ten years. He knew for a fact that nobody was going to do that.

Even a larger country with a population of more than a hundred million people like the Kandrian Empire had less than a hundred Martial Masters. They were nothing short of strategic national war assets and would not be deployed unless the circumstances truly demanded them with genuinely important stakes.

In fact, in truth, even Senior-level protection was generally overkill. Each Martial Senior was a precious tactical weapon and would not be deployed so easily. If anybody did want to harm his family, Martial Apprentices, and Martial Squires would be the limit that any force would be willing to dedicate to the matter. It was absolutely insane to send mighty Martial Seniors who had limited time on missions as

trivial as kidnapping a bunch of commoners living in the middle of nowhere outside a town. It was a horrible allocation of Martial Artist resources.

The only reason Rui had purchased Senior level protection was that he did not trust Chairman Deacon to be in a rational state of mind to realize that deploying Martial Seniors was insane. His hatred for Rui prior to recent events had already been quite high, but still within rational limits. However, he assumed that Deacon had learned that he had killed his son, and thus could imagine the sheer venomous intensity with which he hated Rui.

Perhaps he would be willing to go as far as deploying Martial Seniors to capture or at least kill his family. It was purely due to that that he was willing to go as far as to purchase Senior-level protection for his family.

With the protection of a Martial Senior, not even a meteorite heading straight down toward them had any chance of harming them! This was an extraordinarily extravagant measure that most people could not dream of having.

And Rui was fine with the Quarrier Orphanage never knowing about it. The worst thing he could do on top of subjecting them to risk of harm due to his incompetence was letting them know the extent of it. Not only would it thoroughly disrupt their lives, it would needlessly cause them immense emotional distress when there truly was nothing he could do about it.

"I've just deployed a team of high-grade defensive sensory Martial Squires led by a defensive Martial Senior," Senior Reze explained once Rui had handed over the statement. "They have already arrived at the Quarrier Orphanage and have set up a covert defensive perimeter. All targets of protection are confirmed to be safe and unharmed."

Rui heaved a deep sigh of relief as he felt a burden lift off his shoulders, before turning back to Commissioner Reze. "And this contract will remain active even if I die, correct?"

"Correct, you have purchased the highest level of assurance that the Martial Union can offer in that regard," Commissioner Reze nodded. "Now then, are you willing to inform me what this is all about."

"I'm sure you've already guessed, commissioner," Rui sighed. "Chairman Deacon has learned of my identity."

Commissioner Reze's demeanor grew more serious. "And how did you come about to learn that?"

"That's not important," Rui shook his head.

Commissioner Reze considered his words before falling into deep thought. "Squire Quarrier, I strongly urge you to accept our offer."

Rui immediately shook his head. He was more certain of his decision to refuse the offer of protection in exchange for subordination, than ever. He truly did not want to live that way and was willing to go through great deals and make great personal sacrifices rather than be willing to live in that manner.

Commissioner Reze heaved a sigh at Rui's stubbornness, although he wasn't entirely surprised. Rui had already expressed refusal before, and as a Martial Artist, he could be expected to be stubborn.

"What do you intend to do, then?" Commissioner Reze asked. "At the very least, you must return to the Kandrian Empire at once. Once you are within the Kandrian Empire, it becomes considerably more difficult for Chairman Deacon to do anything to you not just because of the physical separation but also because he is far from his domain of power. Just the presence of the Martial Union within the Kandrian Empire where we are at our most powerful will make him considerably more reserved and passive. We can arrange for accommodations to smuggle you out of the country and take you to the Kandrian Empire."

"That won't work," Rui shook his head. "Now that Chairman Deacon has figured out my identity, he'll know the Martial Union was in on it considering that the Martial Union and the Kandrian Empire withdrew its Martial Squires from the battle of the Root floor. He'll be watching the Martial Union like a hawk. You won't be able to sneak me out from within the Shionel Confederation where he possesses considerable power."

Commissioner Reze considered his words, nodding. "That's quite keen of you, then what do you intend on doing?"

"The Martial Union does not need to intervene," Rui shook his head. "I have made my own arrangements, all I need from the Martial Union is a guarantee that it will abide by the commission even in the event that I die. I need that in writing."

"As I have assured you previously, the Martial Union is not in the habit of failing to deliver in commissions. We cannot afford to be. Every commission ever undertaken in history has been fulfilled by us, and I can assure you with the highest level of guarantee that the Martial Union will abide by the contract regardless of your status. I bid you good luck. Do not hesitate to rely on the Martial Union for any matter, for we are an organization that exists for Martial Artists like yourselves."

Chapter 959: Targets

Rui discussed a few more matters before wrapping up the discussion and leaving. He didn't have time to chitchat with Commissioner Reze about irrelevant matters. He knew that there were some things that he needed to do before he could fulfill his plan.

However, once they were done, he could immediately set out.

Meanwhile, Chairman Deacon had not been sitting still either.

With a large proportion of Deacon Industries' intelligence department furiously scouring the entirety of the Shionel Confederation for Rui Quarrier, they had managed to cover a large amount of ground in a very short amount of time.

On top of that, there were a lot of retroactive analyses conducted on existing data on the Voider when re-analyzed in context with Rui Quarrier being the prime candidate. It was difficult to find absolute and incontrovertible proof that Rui Quarrier was the Voider if he really was the Voider, however, if he wasn't the Voider, then it would be a lot easier to prove that he wasn't.

It seemed counter-intuitive, however, someone who was the Voider would certainly hide evidence indicating that they were the Voider. Someone who wasn't the Voider would not hide evidence that they were not the Voider.

This key difference meant that the evidence for the latter was easier to find than evidence for the former, especially when the former was clearly good at leaving behind no evidence.

Thus, if Rui Quarrier was not the Voider, chances were that there would be something or the other that strongly and reliably indicated that they were not the Voider.

Deep down in his heart, Chairman Deacon knew that Rui was the Voider, but he still had retained enough rationality to trust his intelligence department's verdict regardless.

"However, we have found absolutely no indication that Rui Quarrier and Voider may not be the same person," The deputy director of the intelligence department of Deacon Industries informed Chairman Deacon. "This is rather odd since we have been able to disqualify almost all other B-rank Martial Squires from being candidates for the Voider even when we disregard the fact that they are too weak to be the Voider given how strong the Voider likely is. However, it truly is odd that we have been unable to confirm Rui Quarrier and Kane Arrancar's presence outside the Shionel Dungeon during times when we know for a fact that the Voider was inside the dungeon."

Chairman Deacon's eyes narrowed. "That's rather odd if they had no connection."

"Yes sir. In fact, in the nine months that Rui Quarrier has been in the Shionel Dungeon, not once have we been able to confirm that he was anywhere outside the dungeon during times when we are certain the Voider was within the dungeon. Furthermore, the earliest confirmed Voider raid of the Shionel Dungeon occurred just a few days after Rui Quarrier and Kane Arrancar entered the Shionel Confederation."

"Hm," Chairman Deacon grew more certain of what he already knew. "Any other suspicious patterns?"

"Yes sir, the number of hours that Rui Quarrier and Kane Arrancar have spent in the dungeon in nine months is lower than ninety-nine-point-eight percent of all Martial Squires in the Shionel Confederation," the deputy director mentioned. "Now there isn't inherently anything suspicious about spending only a few hours on average every day in the Shionel Dungeon, there can be corroborating circumstances with that, but the question does arise of what they do in the remaining part of the day. According to the innkeepers of the inn that they have resided in, they're gone for almost all of the day, most days."

"And on top of that, they mysteriously did not return to the inn after the Voider left the final floor of the Shionel Dungeon, despite not having entered the dungeon according to the logs," Chairman Deacon narrowed his eyes. "It's been a few days since then, and they still haven't returned. Furthermore, their last log is that of them exiting the dungeon, thus there is no way they died in the Shionel Dungeon."

The intelligence deputy director nodded in agreement. "True, sir. All these little unlikely coincidences that we have noticed in hindsight truly come together to paint the picture that you're certain about. However, this isn't absolute proof."

"The only reason I insisted on a grounds-up analysis on the prospects of Rui Quarrier being the core behind the Voider was to see if I was blatantly wrong, but everything I hear and see simply further confirms what I have already come to know," Chairman Deacon growled. "Given that Rui Quarrier has not been sighted since before the clearing of the Root Floor, and has seemingly mysteriously vanished, it would be explained if he was aware that he has somehow become exposed to us. In that case, searching for him may very well be futile if he has already left the Shionel Confederation. It will be exceedingly difficult to investigate his whereabouts, especially considering he has some form of stealth."

The intelligence deputy director nodded. "I am inclined to agree, sir. Manual investigation given how little information we have is impractical. This is especially true considering the Voider has connections with Guildmaster Bradt Patrick, which means they do have an ally capable of evading our surveillance."

"In that case, we can focus on other methods," Chairman Deacon noted. "The background check revealed that he lives in an orphanage that he was born and brought up in, have our Kandrian office branch in the Kandrian Empire deploy our regional Martial Apprentices to abduct them covertly. Leave behind a covert message of sorts that he should understand. He'll definitely realize what is happening, and given that the report indicates that he cares for them, he'll be forced to bargain for them. I'll make him suffer through them."

Chairman Deacon found it to be a pity that Rui didn't have a son, he would have been able to inflict the same that he had been subjected to by Rui.

"Ah well," He growled. "A mother will have to do. I'm going to have his eyes pried open with force so he doesn't miss the things that I do to her in front of him."

Chapter 960: Sightings

It wasn't half a day later that the report on the outcome of the operation had already been compiled and delivered to Chairman Deacon.

"The Martial Apprentices got annihilated before they could even reach the target?" The man frowned, narrowing his eyes. "Does the Orphanage have Martial Artists in it besides from Rui Quarrier?"

"Our sources say there are two Martial Apprentices from the Orphanage who are currently part of the Hajin Martial Academy. There are no Martial Artists residing in the Quarrier Orphanage at this moment. The bodies of the Martial Apprentices were never found, it appears they were swiftly and covertly taken down. This points to at the very least a highly elite Apprentice-level covert guard detail, possibly a Squire-level detail," The intelligence director indicated. "Someone wants them protected."

"It's him," Chairman Deacon felt an immense surge of vindication.

Now he wanted to abduct the entire family even more.

"Send in half of all our Martial Squires at once, Also, send Martial Squires to the Kandrian Empire to reinforce our base." The man ordered with a furious expression. "There is no way that they can cope with that. Hurry it up, the more time we waste, the greater the probability that we won't catch him."

"Yes sir," the intelligence deputy director nodded. "Rest assured I do believe that even if it is a Squire-level detail, it is highly unlikely to be able to protect the Orphanage from the Martial Squires that we have at our base. I am quite confident in this assessment of mine."

"Good," Chairman Deacon nodded. "Make sure you don't fail."

"Yes sir,"

Chairman Deacon wasn't happy when the operation failed another half day later.

"What's going on?" Chairman Deacon growled. "How can every single Martial Squire disappear without a trace? There were high-grade defensive Martial Squires deployed among the ones that were sent to abduct the Orphanage. How can they disappear without any trace of a battle?!"

The deputy director grimaced at his boss' anger. "The level of protection the Orphanage has exceeded my expectations. Frankly, for this level of covert protection, the protective detail must have either a plethora of grade-ten Martial Squires or..."

"...Or a Martial Senior," Chairman Deacon gritted his teeth.

He clenched his fist as they quivered with anger.

BANG!

"DAMN IT!"

The deputy director was startled as Chairman Deacon slammed the table in a moment of rage.

"Only someone who knows that his family is being targeted by someone with many Martial Squires would dare to go as far as giving his family this level of protection," Chairman Deacon gritted his teeth. "Deploying Martial Seniors..."

He considered the prospect of doing that, but as angry and hateful as he was, he couldn't easily choose to go with such a drastic decision. No entity could deploy Martial Seniors to other nations without incurring significant consequences. Martial Seniors were like tactical nuclear weapons.

Sending Martial Seniors to another nation to inflict damage against that nation's interests, such as killing a guard detail and kidnapping civilians was no different from one nation firing a nuclear weapon at another country.

It was nothing short of a declaration of war that couldn't be hidden.

As angry, hateful, and vengeful as Chairman Deacon was, he simply could not do something that would certainly be interpreted as a declaration of war by the Martial Union, and the Kandrian Empire as a whole.

The Shionel Confederation was a baseline Sage-level nation, however, it stood no chance against a powerhouse like the Kandrian Empire. Chairman Deacon didn't dare go too far. Martial Squires were one thing, they were small enough for it to be swept under the rug. But a Martial Senior was not something he could send.

On top of that, he couldn't afford the loss of a Martial Senior if the Martial Senior did end up falling in battle. Deacon Industries had suffered a huge blow recently, and although it was still much better off than before, he did not want to take any unnecessary risks that didn't yield any material benefits.

In fact, his vendetta was the only reason that he was pursuing this matter this much. But even that had limits.

"Sir!"

Chairman Deacon frowned as his secretary barged in, interrupting their meeting.

"What is it?"

"Sir, a black-haired and a green-haired individual in full-body attire were briefly spotted in the western port!" His secretary immediately reported. "The eye-witness testimony of the individuals matches their description."

Chairman Deacon's eyes narrowed as his eyes bristled with anger. "Western port? That faces the Kandrian Empire and they would directly be on track to return home. Find out what wing they were in as soon as their identity verification is logged into the database! Send Martial Squires, no, our Martial Seniors to scan the entire transit port looking for them! I want confirmation on their identities as well!"

He was not necessarily convinced that those were Rui and Kane, after all, black hair was unusual, but could easily be faked.

Chairman Deacon had no intention of letting them go if they really were who they were, fortunately, it appeared that they weren't aware of exactly how acute their crisis was. Why else would they choose to leave the Shionel Confederation officially and openly?

Chairman Deacon was relatively certain that, as long as they really were Rui and Kane, they would definitely be caught.

"Send word to the border patrol agency," Chairman Deacon ordered. "Order them to engage in maximum surveillance of the western transit port with the authority vested in me as a member of the Shionel Merchant Cabinet. Mobilize our personnel and swarm every wing of the transit port, I want teams of Martial Artists grid searching the entire facility. Send word to the transit security team to be on the lookout for those two. In the worst-case scenario, order a full lockdown of the entire western transit port. Those two are not leaving the Shionel Confederation alive!"

He rattled off orders to his subordinates as he grew increasingly determined to capture Rui and Kane, in the worst-case scenario, he would ensure that at the very least they would die. What he could now allow was for them to get away alive, retreating to the Kandrian Empire.