

Martial Unity 861

Chapter 861: Aftermath

Eventually, even the leader had enough of chewing out the incompetent Martial Artist, before moving away from where the man was instructed to be.

"What have the scouts concluded regarding the tree?" The man asked one of his subordinates.

"They found no traces of any esoteric ore deposits, sir," His subordinate replied nervously.

The air grew tremendously heavy as his expression grew severe. "They found... nothing?"

"No ore deposits, sir. But their preliminary report does mention a giant hole size of a building in the ground beneath the trunk of the tree with traces of esoteric substances in the soil, indicating that there was a large deposit of esoteric ore in that location," The subordinate replied. "Apparently, it resembles the hole left behind when esoteric ores are extracted."

"Then it is safe to assume that there were ores there at some point? At all? Ever?" The leader asked gruffly.

"It is hard to say, sir," His subordinate shook his head. "The scouts were given very elementary training in the usage of instruments and in the execution of the protocols, we do not have any actual experts at hand. We're all just Martial Artists. Frankly, we have no idea whatsoever what this floor is, or what that hole means. All we can be sure of is that there are no esoteric ores to be mined."

The leader's expression grew even more ugly.

He did not like what he was hearing one bit at all. He was assigned to lead the raid of the fourteenth floor by Chairman Deacon himself. As the leader of the raid on the fourteenth floor, he held full responsibility for its outcome. If he succeeded, he would probably be a candidate for a promotion.

However, the outcome that he ended up with was far away from anything resembling success.

The actual objective of the operation had failed. It was certain that they would not be getting their hands on large supplies of esoteric ore deposits. On top of that, they had been sabotaged by some unknown force that the scouts had still been searching for without any clue. Worst of all, all of their Martial Squires had been injured to varying degrees, while three of them had died, due to the impulsive reaction of a grade-ten Martial Squire.

"What is the latest report on the smoke bomb situation?" He growled. "The scouts must have found something. Something at all. Anything! The Shionel Dungeon is feared for many reasons, but not because smoke bombs fall from fucking nowhere onto unsuspecting Martial Squires! Someone, somehow, is responsible for this! It must be some competing Martial Squires. I have no idea why they would drop a smoke bomb if they weren't going to attack us, but regardless, we were attacked."

His subordinate paused for a moment, looking as though she was told to swallow her foot. "There has been no discovery by the scouts regarding this matter, sir. However, there is an earlier report by one of the patrolling guards who reported managing to get a glimpse of some figures leaving the fourteenth floor during Squire Harens wide-scale attack."

"What?! Why didn't you inform me about this sooner?" He glared at her with a murderous expression as an avalanche of pressure crashed into her.

"S-Sir, you were the one who told us to refrain from bothering you with reports while the Martial Squires were being healed and saved," She managed to squeeze out.

In reality, he had told them to shut the fuck up before he killed one of them, but she decided it was better not to retort with the exact phrasing of his language.

"Hmph," he snorted, refusing to reply to that. "Bring that patrol guard to me, I want to speak to him myself."

Soon enough, the Martial Squire had gleaned a glimpse of Rui's and Kane's presence.

"Sir," The man bowed.

"You said you spotted some figures leaving the dungeon floor?" The leader asked with a severe tone.

"Yes sir,"

"Did you see they carrying anything? Large bags or containers?" The leader asked.

"No sir, I did not see anything like that."

The leader frowned. ('So some rats entered and left empty-handed?')

"For how long?" The leader followed up. "How many were there? What did they look like?"

"It was for just a millisecond, sir. Frankly, it was just a swift blur, I couldn't make out any further details of any kind."

"Tsk," The leader tutted. "Are you unable to recall anything else?"

"...Unfortunately so, sir," The man's tone became meeker as he felt the anger in his assigned leader's tone.

"Leave,"

"Yes sir!"

A few seconds passed as the man finally got a chance to consider all the information he had at hand for the first time. He had been extremely busy with the healing and recovery of the Martial Squires who had got slammed in the head and other vitals with a grade-ten Squire-level attack without the appropriate defenses prepared. If not for the fact that the attack weakened the further it spread out, many more may have died.

His highest priority had been minimizing the losses to Deacon Industries.

Now that the most immediate crises had passed, he was finally beginning to see just how bizarre the events that unfolded were.

The smoke bomb.

The lack of esoteric ore deposits.

The report from the patrol guard earlier.

('Could they all be related somehow? But what does it all mean? What in the world is going on?') He frowned with a solemn expression. ('I need to inform Chairman Deacon of this right now. He'll know what to do with this information.')

He wasn't an analyst, he was mostly relying on his gut instinct regarding the bizarreness of what happened. The only thing he was sure of was that something felt very wrong. Though he wasn't able to even postulate what was happening, things were just so disconnected to him that he wasn't sure what all of it meant.

Regardless, he would need to report all of this to Chairman Deacon and pray he didn't get fired.

Chapter 862: Determined

Rui sighed. The situation was far from desirable, but still quite salvageable. The leader may not have pieced all of it together, but Chairman Deacon certainly would. He had eavesdropped on the conversation that they'd had, coming to learn exactly what the patrol guard had seen, and what else they knew.

Thankfully, it seemed that the part of Rui's plan that aimed to ensure that the raiding team never once got to confirm the existence of the gigantic esoteric ore deposit at the center of the floor below the trunk of the tree was a complete success.

Although there was some speculation that the hole in the ground may have hosted some esoteric ore deposits, not a single person could fathom that there had been a huge deposit sitting there just seconds before they destroyed the last wave of branches of the tree. This gave Rui some breathing space as far as what they could infer from this, but it wasn't enough.

('Chairman Deacon will, at the very least develop some suspicions in regards to the truth. He has enough clues. He has plenty of reason to suspect that the Voider is responsible for the sabotage, barring Squire Harens' impulsive blunder.') Rui analyzed their situation. ('Once that happens, the patrol guard's report will confirm that the Voider is comprised of more than one person, at a bare minimum. That will change how he handles the investigation. More importantly, it will also strongly support the idea that the Voider's modus operandi highly relies on stealth more than anything. The only reason he can't assume this to be the case is that a single patrol guard's ambiguous report filled with uncertainty is not compelling enough. I should thank my stars that only one guard sensed our presence, if multiple guards reported the same thing, then it would be much more ironclad.')

Still, that wasn't too much of a consolation to Rui.

('Also, if he finds proof that there was a huge deposit in the center of the dungeon under the trunk of the tree, then things will get much worse,') Rui sighed. ('Then he'll know for a fact that we're using some way to extract the ore deposit from the dungeon that allows me to ignore conventional carrying capacity since he knows that, at most, several people extracted a gigantic ore deposit and got it out of the dungeon even though it ought not to fit through the tunnels.')

All in all, Rui's analysis allowed on the matter that at best, Chairman Deacon's suspicions would be very close to the truth, and at worst, he'll come to figure out the whole truth.

('Thankfully, the discrepancy in our levels with the incredible might of the Voider will be a barrier that he will be unable to ever see past,') Rui realized. ('The feats that we have accomplished should be impossible in his eyes unless performed by multiple Martial Squires who are truly at the very pinnacle of the Squire Realm.')

This meant that Rui could take comfort in the fact that even if Chairman Deacon went all out with an aggressive large-scale investigation based on the new information. Rui was a grade-six Martial Squire, and Kane was a grade-four Martial Squire. It ought to be absolutely impossible by any metric of evaluation, based on available information for the two of them to be part of the Voider group.

Thankfully, Rui had maintained an extremely thorough front for their official records. Rui and Kane went on a highly normal and very average raid in the most common and populated floors, where they harvested esoteric ore deposits like very normal and average Martial Squires and sold it in the market the way very normal and average Martial Squires did.

Furthermore, Rui made extremely sure that the profits from their public dungeon endeavors were more than enough to cover their public expenses. The costs of food, housing, Martial equipment, utilities, items, and dungeon taxes and fees among other things could all be comfortably covered by their registered revenue and income.

After all, if the two of them splurged the money that they earned as the Voider, it would be extremely suspicious as the question of where all that money came from would naturally present itself. Rui was far from foolish enough to commit such a blunder, hell, he had thought of this the moment he had conceived of his plan many months ago to participate in the Shionel Dungeon raid with Kane.

This elaborate measure that Rui had taken consistently would decisively filter them out of any suspect pool.

('It's a big country with a huge number of Martial Squires that have flooded into the country for quite some time now,') Rui noted. ('Good luck finding us, and good luck knowing it is us. I'm not that easy of a person to pin down. This time's incident is pure dumb luck for you, although it certainly came with its price.')

Rui's determination to succeed in his ambition of being the one to clear and plunder the dungeon had not shaken. In fact, it only grew fiercer now that the difficulty of it had risen slightly.

('Chairman Deacon will probably take some drastic measures after this,') Rui analyzed the businessman, making predictions of how the man would react to this time's event based on the profile that Rui had formed of him after a thorough analysis of any and all information that Rui was able to get his hands on the man.

This allowed him to have a deep insight into the man's modus operandi. He was an aggressive hound that pursued opportunities like there was no tomorrow. Although his acumen for business and politics was inferior to that of Guildmaster Bradt, his conviction and tenacity allowed him to achieve a level of success that threatened Guildmaster Bradt's dominance in the Shionel Confederation.

Rui knew that the man would not let go of the boons of information that he would glean from this incident. He would let loose until he caught Rui, and then he would kill him.

Chapter 863: Realizations

Rui was right.

Rui and Kane retreated from the fourteenth floor, leaving the Shionel Dungeon after Rui confirmed the extent of the damage from the mini-fiasco that the operation had turned out to be. They returned to back to their inn undetected via Void Step, before spending the rest of the day taking a break.

Rui completed his chores such as writing a letter informing Guildmaster Bradt of the location of the latest supplies of esoteric ore deposits, while including an updated three-dimensional map of the Shionel Dungeon as per their agreement.

On the other hand, Chairman Deacon was not having such a chill day.

In fact, any semblance of peace he was having that day had been upended when he read through the report submitted by the captain of the expedition team on the fourteenth floor.

"WHAT?!"

His bellow was loud enough to echo through the main branch of Deacon Industries, making all of his employees wonder what lit his fuse this time.

For the next few hours, Chairman Deacon poured over every word in the report one by one, digesting all the information before he finally put away the documents, before frowning.

His eyes wandered around as he clasped his hands together.

"Sir, the Chairman of Carlun Manufacturers has requested a meeting with you," His chief of staff informed him, breaking the silence.

"Not now, I'm busy," He replied absentmindedly. "Have Vice-Chairman Dellia handle it, or postpone it."

He dismissed her, wanting to think in peace.

('Smoke bombs... Empty floor... Appearing and disappearing figures leaving the Shionel Dungeon,') His eyes narrowed as he parsed through all the information that the report from the leader of the expedition.

There was a lot of information to process, but he quickly made strides in analyzing them as he considered everything that he had just learned. He began with what he considered to be the most interesting and significant.

('Multiple figures appearing and disappearing,') He considered what it meant. ('It's almost certainly not literally the case that they appeared and disappeared out of existence. No Martial Arti technique in the lower Realms should be capable of such a nonsensical feat.')

He quickly ruled out the possibility of it literally being a case of something like teleportation or something of the sort. There was no way Martial Squires ought to be capable of something of that sort.

('Given the sensory jamming traits of the Shionel Dungeon, it's almost certainly the case of said figures eluding the senses of the patrol guard,') Chairman Deacon quickly inferred some basic facts. ('It's not implausible that they just temporarily entered his sensory range momentarily before leaving very quickly, giving him the illusion that they appeared and disappeared.')

He obviously did not take the ambiguous report of a single patrol guard as absolute fact and was open to the idea that the report was not reflective of what happened.

('However, the patrol guard was certain that their direction of travel was towards the tunnel, not away from him. Meaning they appeared and disappeared while the distance between them was more or less constant,') He sharply noted. ('That reduces the probability that the man mistook them entering and exiting his senses as them appearing and disappearing into thin air.')

He considered another event that had happened within a very short time period from it.

('The smoke bombs...') His eyes narrowed. ('Why smoke bombs?')

The answer, of course, was obvious.

('A smoke screen that could hamper even Squire-level sense momentarily. They wanted to sabotage the awareness of the expedition team. To prevent them from witnessing something.') His eyes narrowed. ('Their goal had nothing to do with the expedition team. They didn't mount an attack on the expedition team, they did not harm them anyway. Any damage that was done to them was actually done through friendly fire.')

His eyes narrowed. ('Was that part of the plan? Is Squire Harens actually a secret operative colluding with the Voider?')

This was a possibility that naturally presented itself to him when he considered the facts. The timing was truly quite suspicious.

Of course, he was quite familiar with Squire Harens. The man had been a trigger-happy Martial Artist for as long as he could remember. This reduced the probability of it being a conspiracy. However, the operation didn't make sense if the attack from Squire Harens was the end objective. Such an objective was worthless by any means of evaluation. Use the smoke screen as a cover to launch an attack that ultimately only killed three?

What for? What could that possibly achieve in the big picture?

('Nothing,') Chairman Deacon's eyes narrowed. ('Thus, it can be concluded, that regardless of whether Squire Harens is a colluder or not, that attack could not have been the main objective. There had to be another objective most likely completely detached from the expedition team.')

What else could a third party be interested in those circumstances, if the objective had nothing to do with the team?

('The floor, there is literally nothing else it could be,') He realized. ('And there is only ever one reason a Martial Squire might be interested in a floor.')

Esoteric resources!

Why on Earth would any Martial Squire even step into that nightmare of a dungeon that hampered their senses to the point of being merely one percent of what it normally was? There were exceptions, but none of the applied here.

('They dropped the smoke bombs the moment the expedition team finished the last layer of defenses,') He noted. ('That is not a coincidence. Did they use us to clear the tree? To try and gain esoteric resources at the center of the floor?')

His eyes widened as he stumbled across an even more shocking possibility.

('Did they discover the floor before us? Could they have manipulated us into discovering the fourteenth floor?')

It was an astounding possibility that sent chills down his back. If true, it would mean he had severely underestimated their opponent.

"No no..." He shook his head. "There's no way that's true. It's too unlikely."

Whether he truly believed that, or simply chose that for the comfort of his heart was unclear.

Chapter 864: Bloodhound

Chairman Deacon was far more intelligent and sharper than the leader assigned to lead the raid team. Unlike the latter, the man had quickly constructed several hypotheses and explored several possibilities based on his information and its veracity.

He concluded that it was quite likely that the individuals spotted in question were the Voider, or had something to do with them. He came to the conclusion that their objective could not have had anything directly to do with the raiding team, and most likely had something to do with the floor, most likely having something to do with the esoteric resource deposits that every floor had.

('But no esoteric ore deposits were found,') His eyes narrowed. ('Could they have possibly extracted and run away with it in that brief period of time?')

He wasn't sure. It was also possible that there truly was nothing in the entire floor, and both the Volder and the raiding team were the ultimate losers against the Shionel Dungeon.

('If they did steal all the esoteric resources of the fourteenth floor, then the Volder's ability to extract ore deposits from the Shionel Dungeon is even more powerful than I had ever expected,') He grimaced. ('However, even if they didn't steal anything because the floor truly was empty, they surely intended to steal it, right?')

The smoke screen only bought them a few seconds, they absolutely were aware of this, of course. Yet, they still used it to enter the floor.

('If their goal was to steal the esoteric ore deposits, then the fact that they used a smoke screen that lasted a few seconds means that they possess the ability to extract a gigantic amount of esoteric mineral and organic mass in those same few seconds,') He inferred.

This was the only conclusion that made sense to him.

Of course, he was aware that Martial Squires lived through time differently than mere humans like himself. A few seconds may as well have been ten minutes to them. However, that also applied to the raid team.

The raid team would not sit around for ten minutes, so it didn't make sense.

('Unless Squire Harens attack on the raid team was intended to prevent them from intercepting the Volder in those ten minutes?') He narrowed his eyes.

It wasn't a perfect theory by any means, but he once again could not deny it. He ultimately ran into two possibilities that he was unable to narrow down any further.

Either the Voider was unable to extract the esoteric resources that was their objective, and thus needed Squire Haren to sabotage and hamper them with a powerful attack catching them all off-guard. Or, they had the ability to swiftly extract all of them and leave all in the span of a few seconds.

He wasn't sure which theory was true, but at the moment, they roughly held equal merit. However, he knew of a way to clarify which theory was accurate, and which theory was not accurate.

('I'm going to investigate the living hell out of Squire Harens. I'm going to be subject to a level of intelligence gathering that no Martial Squire has ever been subjected to in history,') He grinned widely.

The outcome of that investigation would most likely tell him which of the two final hypotheses that he had ended up with was the accurate theory.

Still, he couldn't believe that he would end up looking positively on such a horrendous fiasco. Not only had the raid team ended up empty-handed but most of them had been injured, and three had even died, all to friendly fire.

That was the very definition of a fiasco.

Yet, he could tolerate it, the intelligence that he had come across as a consequence of these events was truly incredibly valuable!

With this, he was no longer wandering in the dark, desperately trying to come across a shred of information on the Voider. He was actually quite shocked that he had come across it in the first place.

The events in recent times had left a poor taste in his mouth, but now it seemed that the goddess of luck had taken pity on him and given him an opportunity to turn things around.

('And turn things the fuck around I will,') He could feel his blood boiling. He was not going to let go of this opportunity no matter what.

He hadn't been known as the bloodhound of the Shionel Confederation for nothing. Once he got a hold of his enemies, he never let go. He shredded them to death bit by bit. Almost none had tangled with him

and made it out in one piece. Barring Guildmaster Bradt, no one had ever gotten the better of him in the long run.

This modus operandi was in stark contrast to the guildmaster, who was closer to the Grim Reaper, a surgeon of a businessman who acted with precision and accuracy. His enemies fell before they realized what happened.

He lifted a communication device from his table, contact his secretary.

"Arrange a meeting with all the major foreign stakeholders of the Shionel Dungeon, all twenty-nine of them. The purpose of the meeting will be the issue of the Voider, I intend to inform them of some information and propose a plan that will be in our mutual interests.

He rattled off a few more details before putting his communication device away.

('I have already united the supplier merchants and businesses of the local supplier market in the Shionel Confederation under my banner against the threat that Esosale Suppliers and the Bradt Distribution Service together represent. Now, I ought to do the same with the foreign forces with interests tied to the supply of the esoteric resources from the dungeon,') His eyes narrowed.

He had no issue with harnessing all the help that he could get, even if it was an admission of defeat, it wasn't as though the Voider was a business whiz who schooled him in commerce. They were in fundamentally different fields.

"Let's see if you can fight the world, little Squire."

Chapter 865: Gathering

Rui and Kane returned to the dungeon, however, this time they returned to the twelfth floor, rather than setting out to search for more floors. Furthermore, this time, they didn't use Void Step to mask their entry and exit into the Shionel Dungeon.

This was one of their public endeavors as Rui and Kane from the Kandrian Empire, not as the Voider. Furthermore, Rui did not use his sword or his pipe to paralyze or annihilate the inland Shionel taipans on the twelfth floor this time. Instead, he used his regular techniques instead.

BAM!!

CRACK

THUD

"Huff..." He heaved a sigh as he wiped a bead of sweat. "Man, this job is so much harder when we're doing this normal Martial Squires. How do they even manage?"

"True," Kane sighed as he finally defeated a taipan himself after an extensive battle.

Doing this gave Rui perspective on what it was like for the average Martial Squire adventurer. It was moments like these that made him realize how detached from the norm he was.

He was working almost one hundred times slower than normal!

Normally he would just need to ignore all the inland taipans as he extracted all the ores in the area with Void Step, while occasionally rising up when Kane needed a break, during that time he would easily annihilate any serpents that attacked them having detected their presence. The sheer rate at which he normally extracted esoteric ore deposits was far lower than at his peak, although he was doing far better than any Martial Squire of his grade thanks to the fact that he had built extensive predictive models for the Shionel Taipans.

"What are you thinking about?" Kane asked, noticing Rui absorbed deep in thought.

"... You remember how I told you a long time ago before we set out to the Shionel Dungeon that it was quite likely that the Kandrian Empire would eventually put two and two together in regard to our operations?" Rui asked him.

"Yeah, what about it?"

"I think that time is not so far into the future," Rui replied.

"What makes you say that?"

"Well... A combination of predictions drawn from analyses, as well as a little sprinkle of intuition, I suppose,"

The recent event that had occurred on the fourteenth floor led him to believe that it had accelerated the inevitable event of the Martial Union coming to learn of the truth.

He had reason to believe this.

Simultaneously in the main branch of Deacon Industries, a rather historic gathering had taken place.

In a large magnificent hall in the foreign affairs wing, several dozen individuals had gathered. They wore lush and posh formal clothes, each bearing the insignia of a nation or a large conglomerate, or an independent organization.

"Ladies and gentlemen, representatives and delegates," Chairman Deacon stood before them, wearing the most ostentatious and extravagant attire his personal groomers could put together for the occasion. "Now that we have all gathered here, I would like to begin by thanking all of you for taking the time to accept my invitation. The matter that I wish to discuss with all of you today is one that affects all of us at the moment and one that I hope we can come to a resolution to come together and handle once and for all.

Although the various ambassadors, representatives, and leaders all had perfectly trained stoic expressions, the atmosphere had grown heavier. Such was the magnitude of the importance of the matter that they were going to be focusing on finding a way to collectively tackle it.

"Since the opening of the Shionel Dungeon, the supply of certain esoteric resources has spiked unimaginably. The reason for this, of course, is the many bounties that flow out of the dungeon every

day. Each and every person has or represents a nation or a party that has a strong vested interest in procuring supplies from the Shionel Dungeon, for commercial or private use. And without exception, every single person here has been significantly hampered by the Voider since his operation."

None of them denied his words, mostly because they were undeniable. Nations that had deployed a huge number of Martial Squires to bring back large supplies of powerful and strategic esoteric resources. It was far less taxing to procure the esoteric supplies through the dungeon directly.

The reason for this was because the second they reached the hands of a third-party supplier, their cost was extremely high, despite the abundant supply. The reason for this was that as huge as the supply was, the demand was even greater. The list of nations, companies, and other organizations that needed these strategic and powerful esoteric resources was long, and not even the Shionel Dungeon could satisfy even a portion of the east-most section of the Panama Continent.

That was why it was exceedingly costly to procure esoteric supplies through the market compared to mining and harvesting ore deposits from the dungeon itself. That was the strategy that most nations, companies, and other organizations employed. They would either deploy private Martial Squires or act as patrons in the Shionel Confederation and gather a large number of Martial Squires through their patronage to supply them with the esoteric resources that they sought.

And that is what they did do until things went for the worse and the Martial Squires began supplying them with increasingly diminishing returns. What had been an incredibly fruitful venture in obtaining precious resources had now become an extremely expensive and losing venture.

The reason for this was because of the Voider, and Esosale Suppliers that suddenly began dominating the extraction of esoteric ore deposits to a level that was hardly imagination. None of them understood how and where the Esosale was extracting such gigantic amounts of esoteric resources. And it bode extremely badly for their businesses.

"However, that will change," He informed all of them with a confident smile. "We have obtained precious intelligence on the Voider, and I have strong reason to believe that, with our power pooled together, we can root him out and eliminate him."

Among the crowd of bigshots that Chairman Deacon had invited were two who were listening in rapt attention.

The diplomat from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kandrian Empire, and a rank-four Martial Commissioner from the Martial Union.

The Kandrian Empire was certainly one of the largest foreign stakeholders when it come to the supply of esoteric resources from the Shionel Dungeon. Both the Royal Family and the Martial Union had dispatched a huge number of Martial Squires from the Royal kandrian Army and the internal members of the Union to the Shionel Confederation to obtain a large number of resources for them.

Even though the Martial Union did not have as much of a heavy need for the esoteric resources of the Shionel Dungeon, it was still very important for the Union to maintain a foothold in every new shift in paradigms, in order to maintain their economic and political capital.

Thus, the matter of the Voider had been irksome to the nation and the Martial Union, although neither side had any intention of pursuing the matter aggressively of their own volition. The reason for this was fundamentally due to the large distance between then the Shionel Confederation and the Kandrian Empire. The former was outside of the latter's domain of influence. Although Martial Squires could cross the ten thousand kilometers that separated the two nations, it was still too much of a geopolitical separation for the Martial Union and the Kandrian Empire to throw a fit about getting dominated in the dungeon.

Had the dungeon been within their domain of influence like around the Commonwealth Duchy of Vinfrana or the Kingdom of Violis, they would have taken a much more active and aggressive effort, but due to it being in the Shionel Confederation, they had to more or less make do and mitigate their losses.

Distance meant that it was more expensive to transfer the necessary capital, resources, and manpower to the Shionel Confederation just to match the dominant forces in that part of the eastern side of the continent. They simply would not be able to outcompete powerful nations within their home turf, for the same reason that those same nations could not outcompete the Kandrian Empire within their domain of power.

However, both the Kandrian Empire and the Martial Union were interested in what the Chairman of the second most powerful company and the largest enemy of the Voider had to say when he gathered them all there. They did not have particularly high expectations from this meeting.

The Kandrian diplomat was intrigued by the intelligence on the Voider that Chairman Deacon went on to present to them but ultimately was not too stirred, though he didn't allow his expressions to betray his reactions. Although there was a chance that whatever Chairman Deacon seemed to have in mind would pay out, the Kandrian Empire had already altered their expectations and plans in the Shionel Confederation, accounting for the suffocating success of Esosale Suppliers backed by the Bradt Distribution Service.

In reality, the Martial Commissioner of the Martial Union should have also been in a similar position, yet when he went through the intelligence that Chairman Deacon had done onto present them, he narrowed his eyes as something clicked in his mind.

('Appearing and disappearing Martial Squires?') He raised an eyebrow. ('If that's due to a technique, then...')

As a Martial Commissioner of the Martial Union, he was extremely familiar with all the Martial Squires registered with the Martial Union. It was a necessity since he was required to commission Martial Artists of fitting internal missions from the Martial Union.

That was why when he came across that detail in the intelligence he couldn't help but recall the currently only existing Martial Squire in the Kandrian Empire that had mastered a grade-ten Martial Art technique that would allow him to do exactly what the Voider had done according to the intelligence that Chairman Deacon had presented all of them.

He didn't even bother finishing his thought as he felt that the probability of it being true was extremely low. Still, he couldn't help but feel as though he was onto something.

('I should look into this when the meeting is done,') The Martial Commissioner narrowed his eyes.

"As you can see, the intelligence clearly indicates that the Voider is a small group of Martial Squires that has some kind of potent stealth technique, that allows for evasion of monsters to a level that is unsurpassed," Chairman Deacon explained. "We gather that the Voider is most likely an unassociated, and unpatroned group of Martial Squires putting on a facade when they're not in the dungeon. These, along with other pieces of clues that we have gathered or inferred, gives us enough of a foundation to conduct a genuine investigation that can significantly narrow down the list of possibilities."

"That will most likely require extensive resources, capital, and manpower, more so than Deacon Industries alone can handle," One of the invited members remarked.

"You are correct," Chairman Deacon nodded, not denying the woman's words. "However, that is the reason that I have conferred this meeting. With aid from your nations, companies, and organizations, we can do what it takes to find and eliminate the Voider. I have already gathered support from the domestic stakeholder merchants and businessmen who have been shafted by the Voider, with your support, I am confident that we can take down the Voider."

His words seemed to succeed in a certain degree of persuasion, as by the end of the meeting, most of the members of the meeting tentatively expressed a willingness to participate.

"The Kandrian Empire is willing to aid you in our mutual benefits depending on the proposed manner of operation," The diplomat of the Kandrian Empire gave a positive but flexible answer. There was no harm in participating as long as it wasn't too much of a liability.

"The Kandrian Martial Union will consider the proposal," The Martial Commissioner replied non-committally.

Chapter 867: Clash

Chairman Deacon went on to present a rigorous strategy that involved using brute force to eventually either find or kill the Voider inside the Shionel Dungeon, or identify the Voider, and assassinate him outside the Shionel Dungeon to minimize risks, or overwhelm him with numbers inside the Shionel Dungeon where murder was legal.

He did not come up with brand new revolutionary ways of going about the investigation and search. The intelligence that Chairman Deacon had gotten in the last operation on the fourteenth floor was a fluke and stroke of good luck. He had not gotten that information through his own merits.

At the end of the day, the information made the search easier, and he had managed to accrue enough political and economic support from various stakeholders that he had been gathering from the day he decided to take down the Voider. Brute force searching through all registered and non-registered Martial Squires and evaluating the probability of them being the Voider, aggressive exploration of the

Shionel Dungeon to beat the Voider with an enormous flood of Martial Squires. Systematic capitalization and monopolization of dungeon floors with increased security to minimize the probability of the Voider harvesting from the floor.

These were all measures that had now become extremely powerful given the sheer amount of capital and resources that he gathered from like-minded allies. While Chairman Deacon celebrated the meeting as a success after it ended, the diplomat of the Kandrian Empire and the Martial Commissioner of the Martial Union exchanged words while returning from the meeting.

"Why did the Martial Union not accept the proposal?" The diplomat of the Kandrian Empire asked with a slightly less formal tone.

"We deemed that there may have been a potential clash of interests," Martial Commissioner Reze replied shortly.

"A clash of interests with Chairman Deacon? Or is it perhaps the Bradt Distribution Service? The Kandrian Empire is aware of the Martial Union's contract with the Bradt Distribution Service to access the market for Martial Arts that is west of the Shionel Confederation," The Kandrian diplomat tried poking some information from his counterpart.

"It's a potential clash of interests, the Martial Union will handle the manner the way it deems most appropriate," Commissioner Reze replied vaguely.

This drew some confusion from the Kandrian diplomat. Although the two of them had not conferred together prior to the meeting to clarify their positions, he had thought that the two of them had a mutual understanding of each other's interests and would most likely come to the same decision for the same reasons.

However, it became clear that there was something had caused the Martial Union to question whether joining Chairman Deacon's little anti-Voider club was the right decision.

The diplomat attempted to gain more information in vain a few more times before the two parted ways to their seven-star suites in one of the most luxurious hotels in the Shionel Confederation, courtesy of the Deacon Industries.

He quickly opened a portable terminal that was assigned to him as a rank-four Martial commissioner, before quickly looking into the most updated information that the Intelligence Department of the Martial Union possessed on one single Martial Squire.

Kane Arrancar.

He frowned as he went through the neatly organized and categorized information.

"Current location... Kingdom of Violis?" Martial Commissioner Reze read on with interest. "The veracity of the intelligence is rated a seven out of ten, so decent, but not entirely reliable. Hm... The intelligence comes from his border transit pass statements and a confirmed entry into the Kingdom of Violis through the official port of entry... But has not been sighted since entering the nation originally..."

He mumbled to himself as he went through the most updated information that the Kandrian Martial Union had on Kane Arrancar.

"He's researched the Shionel Dungeon before heading for the Kingdom of Violis...?" Commissioner Reze's eyebrows rose as he looked through the information that Kane accessed or purchased from the Martial Union and adjacent sources of information. (That's extremely strange. Why bother with such extensive research if he had no intentions of going to the Shionel Confederation?)

The Martial Commissioner had only decided to look into him out of a hunch and a whim, but he had stumbled across something suspicious.

He quickly pulled out the officially registered Kandrian comms device that had been issued to him. It was a special model that was capable of communicating even across the huge amount of distance between the Kandrian Empire and the Shionel Confederation.

"Martial Commissioner Reze. Calling Directive 36F-41. Conduct an immediate and urgent verification of the location of Squire Kane Arrancar. Recommended point of investigation: The Shionel Confederation," He spoke into the device, before immediately closing it and putting it away.

It could be that he was entirely wrong and this was just a misunderstanding. Perhaps Squire Kane had intended to go to the Shionel Confederation at one point, before changing his mind and instead heading to the Kingdom of Violis for whatever reason. However, he suspected that this may not be the case.

Still, even if it wasn't the case. What he truly suspected was so unlikely that he did not even bother uttering it out loud, he would feel far too silly of accusing Squire Kane of being the Voider.

Still, there was a small connection, although it was possible that he was reading too deeply into it.

('Still, if there's even a small possibility...') His eyes narrowed, before shaking his head and focusing on the many other matters he needed to tend to. Regardless of whether it was true or false, the urgent investigation that he had had the Intelligence Department of the Shionel Confederation begin using his higher authority, would reveal the facts of the matter.

He needed to remind himself that even if Squire Kane Arrancar was in the Shionel Confederation, that did not necessarily mean that he had anything to do with anything. He knew that Squire Kane did not have a good relationship with his family, thus it was possible that these measures were taken to throw them off.

Chapter 868: Familiar

Rui and Kane quickly bounced back from the incident on the fourteenth floor as they set out in search of new floors once more. Rui did not intend to sit around doing anything, and the second they returned from their fake public trip, the two of them set out in search of a new dungeon floor to explore and raid.

At this point, about a little over thirty percent of the Shionel Dungeon had been fully explored despite nearly a year and a half passing by since the opening of the dungeon. Yet the pace of clearance of the dungeon was increasing significantly.

Part of the reason was the impact that Rui had had. The twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth floors got cleared at an extreme pace now thanks to him harvesting most, or even all of it extremely quickly.

And the two of them did not intend to stop any time soon. The two of them quickly set about into the dungeon, looking for new floors. Rui had resolved this time to stay away from any human presence. Last

time's fiasco taught him that he could never be too careful around other people especially when the stakes were high. Even if he made sophisticated and complex plans, he simply could not do anything about dumb luck. Thus, he resolved not even give luck a chance to mess up a plan.

The two of them set out as they explored the Shionel Dungeon for new floors.

"I think it's interesting how different floors are so different," Kane commented out of the blue. "Feels really strange when I think about it. Like, why is there no overlap in the monsters between all of the floors? Seems like every floor has a unique pattern that is never repeated."

"True," Rui nodded. "It is strange. The floors are supposed to be pockets of space formed from areas that either didn't have dense vegetation across them that was dungeonified when the roots of the species came across high-energy powerful esoteric mines."

Still, it felt almost artificial to a certain degree how different species were perfectly isolated to different parts of the Shionel Dungeon, although monsters did leave their floors often. He wasn't sure how that could be the case.

Wouldn't one normally expect that animals get naturally mixed across the entire dungeon like how forests and jungles normally were?

He wasn't sure why this wasn't the case inside the dungeon. Just as Kane was about to respond, he paused when he noticed that Rui had suddenly become a lot more alert.

"What's up? Is it a new floor?" Kane asked with a hopeful glance.

"I'm not sure, honestly," Rui murmured. "Let me get a closer look."

He began jogging forward, causing Kane to do the same as he kept up with Rui. Rui's eyes wandered around, lost, as he used Riemannian Echo to keep track of his environment.

He frowned as he didn't quite seem to understand what he was witnessing.

Then, they finally got close enough for Rui to get a full picture of what he was looking at.

His eyes widened as he paused, speechless.

"What is it?" Kane asked impatiently. It was clear to him that Rui was seeing something truly strange.

"It's a floor, alright... But there's only one monster the size of a portion of a district," Rui murmured.

Kane's eyes widened as his head cocked back in shock.

"What?!"

Districts were usually a few kilometers in length. For a monster to be the size of a district, its body would be enormously giant. Rui had trouble picturing just how big it was.

The two of them eventually reached the end of a tunnel that opened into a gigantic cavity.

"Holy shit!" Rui's eyes widened. "It's dead! Its head is completely destroyed! Also... this species. I know this species! It's an Earthen Basilisk!"

Rui's mind flashed back to many years ago when he undertook his first hunting class mission as a young low-grade Martial Apprentice. Back then, he was extremely weak and inexperienced, yet had stumbled upon a dangerous subterranean beast that traveled beneath the ground and sensed through seismic radiation. Rui had employed clever tactics and strategies to corner and eventually kill the beast.

He hadn't immediately made the connection because of the missing head of the creature, but once his senses enveloped the entire corpse, he recognized it almost immediately.

"But what the hell is one doing in the Shionel Dungeon, and how in the world did it get so gigantic?" Rui couldn't help but be bewildered as he swept through the information that he had on the Earthen basilisk from his mission with it.

The Earthen basilisk was a species that existed in the Beast Domain. He vividly remembered being told that the Beast Domain was so dangerous that even the Earthen Basilisk found the need to migrate away from the core of the continent and towards the outskirts, eventually leading it to the Kandrian Empire.

He did not know that they were capable of growing that big. Nor did he know whether that actually was the case, or whether this one was an exception due to the strange environment of the Shionel Dungeon monsterifying it, causing it to grow more powerful.

Rui felt goosebumps on his skin at the thought of the creature running amuck in the dungeon with its great size, or at the thought of it running amuck outside of the dungeon in the outskirts. It would be an absolute menace to put down since Martial Seniors were not allowed anywhere near the dungeon.

Based on the sheer size of the Earthen Basilisk compared to the weak Apprentice level one that he fought many years ago, he had a hard time imagining how absurdly difficult it would be to take down. Its sheer size meant that even with his blade and pipe, he was not going to be one-shotting it any time soon, although he was able to conceive of ways to take it down.

"Speaking of which... What on Earth happened to a creature this powerful? How did it die such a miserable death?" Rui couldn't help but wonder.

Chapter 869: Lookout

The appearance of a headless corpse of an Earthen Basilisk on a floor of the Shionel Dungeon came as a considerable surprise to Rui since he hadn't read anything about them being spotted in the Shionel Dungeon.

He also recalled being informed that Earthen Basilisks reproduced as much as they ate, thus it was extremely strange that the Shionel Confederation wasn't filled with Earthen Basilisks running around killing humans considering that the Shionel Dungeon had been open for nearly a year and a half.

On top of that, its size was truly shocking, Rui wasn't even sure that this monster would be classified within the Squire Realm. Perhaps only the most powerful Martial Squires had a chance of killing it because of its oversized vitals and weaknesses along with its big body that would probably make subterranean travel even harder.

That begged the next question. What happened to its head?

"It was eaten..." Rui murmured with shock. "By another creature."

When he observed the open wound where its head used to be, he could see that the uneven length surface indicated that something had feasted on the creature's carcass.

"Furthermore, there are wounds across its body. Claws and jaws have ravaged the creature."

Based on the size of the wounds, Rui estimated the size of the creature to be around the size of a building, which was still much smaller than the size of the Earthen basilisk. Yet this creature was able to devastate and kill the Earthen Basilisk.

Rui glanced around as he observed the land of the dungeon floor. The earth was dug up, highly uneven, and there were even large holes.

('That means it definitely attempted to use its subterranean advantage,') Rui noted as he analyzed all the data he had. ('Yet it still lost.')

Rui grew extremely paranoid as he swept his senses across the entirety of the floor once more, paying close attention to detail. For a moment, he thought that the predator might still be around.

He did not think that he would be able to beat a predator that mauled the Earthen basilisk so brutally. How on Earth could he? His little sword and pipe tactics probably wouldn't help in the least at this moment in a one-on-one. The best he could do was escape with Void Step.

('That creature probably isn't limited to the peak of the Squire Realm,') Rui figured with a heavy heart. A creature that transcended the limits of the Squire Realm was something he wanted to avoid. Yet he couldn't help but be curious as to how strong the creature was, and what kind of monster it was.

"Woah!" He heard Kane exclaim. "Its scales are made out of esoteric substances!"

Rui turned towards him, nodding. "The beast probably consumed an immense amount of vegetation containing dense esoteric substances in it. Causing it to grow and develop stronger scales. We can mine and harvest them from the corpse, I've verified that the area is safe, so go ahead."

"You're not helping?" Kane frowned.

"I'm keeping an alert eye on our surroundings with my Riemannian Echo," Rui told him. "If whatever killed it returns, I'll react to it immediately, and we can use Void Step to get the hell out of here immediately."

Rui refused to focus on anything else knowing that a creature this powerful was in the Shionel Dungeon and was even at their very location not too long ago. That was far too scary for him to ignore and he promptly took the role of a scout and a lookout. He did not mind if this may reduce their gains or lower gains, nor did he mind if it took twice as long. He wanted to ensure that if the predator returned, the two of them would be able to Void Step away thanks to Rui's alertness.

"If I say red, then get to me reach out to me and use Void Step instantly, got it?" Rui told him, as he handed him the dimensional storage ring.

"Gotcha," Kane nodded as he got to work.

Although Rui did not help, he hovered very close to Kane at all times, to ensure that there was absolutely no delay in their reactions if Rui detected the approach of the predator. Kane immediately got to work as he quickly began extracting the scales and storing them in the storage dimension.

Rui on the other hand was extremely mentally alert, to the point that he was even straining himself to the absolute maximum, using the Mind Palace technique to read space curvature to an even large degree than he normally could although it was quite tiring. He was determined to make sure that he made it in time in case anything happened.

Eventually, a lot of time passed and Kane was finally done.

"Now we just got to pop these over by the burying spot and we're good," Kane replied.

"Huff..." Rui heaved a heavy sigh. "Yeah, man, we need to reconsider our risk evaluation if there are creatures like these in the Shionel Dungeon."

He pointed to the Earthen Basilisk corpse, while also referring to the predator that killed it. "Floors have generally gotten harder the deeper we go. If there are floors that are even more dangerous, or infested with monsters this powerful, even we will have a hard time Kane."

"Yeah that sounds way too much," Kane smiled wryly. He was quite weak physically compared to normal Squire-level monsters, against final-boss Squire-level monsters, just a simple attack from them might utterly annihilate him. A single grade-ten-level technique or two was not enough to give him confidence against such creatures. Thus he did approve of Rui considering being even more careful with deeper and potentially more dangerous floors.

Rui, instead, was a little hopeful that these two creatures were outliers. A dungeon filled with such creatures was closer to a Senior-level dungeon than it was to a Squire-level dungeon, in which case Seniors would be able to approach much closer than they currently could, thus he wasn't too very concerned.

Chapter 870: Aggressive

The two of them had inadvertently spent an entire day in the Shionel Dungeon. It had taken nearly three hours of exploring the dungeon with Rui's Riemannian Echo, and then the rest of the remaining day for Kane to finally extract all the esoteric resources himself from the corpse of the Earthen Basilisk.

The two of them immediately left the fifteenth floor as they headed back home.

On the way, back, Rui had much to think about. The floors of the dungeon were definitely diverging from the norm far more than he had expected.

Generally, floors were pockets of esoteric resource reservoirs, monsters tended to coalesce because they were large open spaces.

Thus, Rui had expected that the floors would all be straightforward monsters that could very easily be dealt with similar strategies each time. Yet this, and previous floors showed him that he should not be certain of what to expect.

After all, he ran into a town of monsterified living zombies inside a floor, things didn't really get that much crazier than that.

Rui suddenly paused as his senses picked up something strange.

"What is it now?" Kane asked with dismay, having experienced this many times now. "Is it a monster or another floor?"

"No, actually, it's a bunch of Martial Squires in different groups in different places... They're actually coming down the same tunnel system that we're traversing," Rui murmured.

"How many?"

"A total of forty-three that I can sense," Rui frowned. "They're spread out and heading in different directions, exploring the dungeon."

"Wait, you're telling me that the normies have begun catching up with us?" Kane's eyes widened with shock. Rui's Riemannian Echo gave him such an absolutely uncontested dominant advantage in the Shionel Dungeon. The two of them were much further and deeper down the Shionel Dungeon than any martial Squire had ever been because they possessed absolutely no fear of getting lost with Rui's senses and memory.

Most Martial Squires had to explore more conservatively due to this and required more manpower.

Even Rui frowned as he found the presence of dozens of Martial Squire this deep below the surface to be quite odd. He was sure that they had been left quite behind in the dust.

"This must have something to do with the recent surge in Martial Squires," Rui's eyes narrowed.

In the past week, there had been a sudden surge of Martial Squires into the Shionel Confederation, and the traffic in the Adventurer Ring had increased visibly.

Rui had an idea as to what was causing this phenomenon, but there was nothing he could do about preventing it. He just needed to make sure that it did not change the outcome.

"Chairman Deacon sure is being aggressive, as predicted," Rui snorted. "The monopolization of dungeons has been his one and only semi-fruitful endeavor at beating me. He's going to start aggressively exploring with the help of the capital and manpower of internal and external foreign stakeholders that he has surely united by now and beat me with sheer numbers."

"What do his allies gain by helping him though?" Kane raised an eyebrow.

"The same success that they would have gained had I not participated in the Shionel Dungeon exploration and plunder," Rui replied. "Basically, they're going to join their forces and overwhelm me with numbers to try and restore the balance that existed before. He has internal and external support, and on top of that, he keeps increasing the bounty on my head that has also successfully harnessed freelancers and independents into hunting the nation for me. Furthermore, he is no doubt conducting extensive brute force investigations on all Martial Squires as well, as expensive as that is."

Rui did suspect that he was probably one of the most wanted Martial Squires in recent history. What other Martial Squire had so many countless Martial Squires working against him or her in such a manner?

"Sheesh, the man truly is fit to be called a bloodhound. The only reason that Chairman Deacon has not used his political power and governmental authority to leverage the state's power against me is because Guildmaster Bradt is singlehandedly crushing any attempt at that with his political capital and authority, however, he's doing that out of self-interest. And unless I can give him even more than I have given him, he is unwilling to do more," Rui murmured.

Unfortunately for him, he couldn't think of any bargaining chips that he could use to trade with Guildmaster Bradt to put an end to all this. Although Guildmaster Bradt did have the power to put an end to all of this by leveraging his enormous political and economic capital, it was extremely expensive and costly. Rui was aware that even with the precious map, and the profits of Esosale Suppliers, he would not be able to convince Guildmaster Bradt to put in even more work without some heavy concessions.

This was on a whole other level compared to asking Guildmaster Bradt to simply pass a bill amending some laws and protocols.

"Hmmm..." Rui narrowed his eyes. "What to do indeed... I can think of numerous plans. But for now, Let's get the hell out of here. These guys will eventually discover the fifteenth floor and inform Chairman Deacon, or the Shionel Adventurer Guild about the fifteenth floor."

Rui was curious about what the analysis on the fifteenth floor from the relevant experts would be. Every time a floor was discovered, eventually its details would become public, and a large number of experts who were unable to get a first-hand look would offer their insights on the floors of the Shionel Dungeon.

Although he was quite confident in his deductions and analyses, it did not hurt to learn the insight of actual experts who studied stuff like this for a living. He was also quite curious about how his skinning of the corpse for esoteric resources would be interpreted. Would they also give him credit for killing the Earthen Basilisk?

He hoped so, it would make his life easier.