

Martial Unity 871

Chapter 871: Controversy

As Rui predicted, the fifteenth floor was soon discovered by the exploration team that happened upon it later than they did. The discovery eventually leaked to the public, causing an uproar. The thought of the fifteenth floor containing a single enormous monster was terrifying to most people.

Yet there was also a lot of morbid curiosity into the matter. The fact that it was headless and that fact that its outer scales, strongly suspected to be made out of esoteric substances, were stripped from the body indicated human intervention.

However, there was certainly some controversy over the matter.

"The destruction of the head does not seem to be caused by a Martial Art technique," An expert stated in a discussion talk show. "For instance, Martial Art techniques, at the Squire level, at least, cannot erase matter from existence. Thus the theory that a Martial Squire, even if it's the notorious Voider, was responsible for the destruction of the head is a bit dubious because it begs the question of where the head actually went. Even if he destroyed it, the destroyed tissue would still be present. However, the publicized reports do not indicate any such finding."

"It is possible that the head was highly dense with esoteric substances," Another expert pushed back. "We also notice that the scales are missing, are they not? And were clearly extracted with care, not just ripped off by a beast. This would entertain the possibility that the beast was killed and all the parts of its body containing the desired resources, including the head and the scales."

There was considerable controversy over the matter, and many people either fell on one or the other side. Most people, however, were fascinated by both possibilities. After all, regardless of whether it was some apex predator or the Voider that utterly demolished the Earthen Basilisk, it would not change the fact that they possessed the power to do so, despite the Earthen Basilisk being a living nightmare to most people.

Most people hoped that it was a Martial Squire, rather than some unknown apex predator. After all, the former was fighting on the side of humans, while the latter was a threat. If it ever broke out, they would only be able to stop by employing Martial Squires unless it escaped outside of the range where Martial Seniors could not enter. In that case, the beast would be instantly annihilated by any Martial Senior.

Although people were awed by the beast, their faith in Martial Seniors was stronger. They did not believe that anything that emerged from the Shionel Dungeon was capable of challenging a Martial Senior.

Rui was liable to agree, although, he wasn't entirely certain that the predator responsible for killing the gigantic Earthen Basilisk was something Martial Squires could handle. The worst-case scenario was that it was beyond the Squire Realm, but just far enough below the Senior Realm that it did not trigger the defense mechanisms of the Shionel Dungeon. Meaning that there was a quasi-Senior level monster roaming around the dungeon, and the only ones who could deal with were Martial Squires.

Just this possibility alone made not just Rui, but also other Martial Squires who were traversing the dungeon, a lot warier of traveling too deep into it. If they ran into such a creature during their exploration, then they were more than likelier doomed. Perhaps the only people who could handle such a monster were S-rank adventurers. Rui supposed that a group of S-rank Martial Squires could potentially take on such a creature and win.

There were ways in which the strongest Squires of the Squire Realm could take on and potentially defeat something that broke the conventional limits of the Squire Realm.

Still, he would rather not have to deal with that.

KNOCK KNOCK.

Rui's eyes narrowed as he sensed a man standing outside their inn door.

"Were you expecting guests?" Kane frowned.

"No, just dreading them," Rui murmured as he recognized the emblem on the man's clothes. He opened the door, coming face to face with a well-groomed man who had a butler's attire on.

The man immediately bowed deeply, before addressing Rui.

"Squire Quarrier, forgive me for the disturbance, I have an important message to convey to you as the chief of staff assigned to aid Martial Commissioner Reze," He rose up from his gesture.

Rui immediately narrowed his eyes as he considered the name. He had never heard of Martial Commissioner Reze, but that was because Martial Commissioners were generally not renowned individuals in the Kandrian Empire.

The Martial Union only put a focus on its Martial Artists, all other humans were effectively relegated to the silent background even as they worked for Martial Squires. After all, it was an organization for Martial Squires, by Martial Squires, and from Martial Squires.

The man pulled out the Martial Union card of the Martial Commissioner, featuring his name, identity, and even a contact number, offering it to Rui.

The card specified that Martial Commissioner was a rank three Martial Commissioner, meaning he had the authority to craft Senior-level internal missions and deploy Martial Seniors in missions. This meant that he possessed a tremendous amount of power as far as Rui was concerned.

The fact that such a bigshot wanted to interact with him was even more confirmation of his suspicions. He had always known that it would be impossible to keep the Martial union on their back, and it appeared that there was a good chance that today was the day.

"What message?" Rui asked nonchalantly. "As far as I'm aware, I have no business with this Martial Commissioner."

"Commissioner Reze wishes to speak to you and your partner Kane Arrancar about some very important matters in person," The man explained. "If you are willing, we have a carriage that can take you to him immediately."

Rui considered the matter, before sighing. "Alright, we accept."

Soon enough two of them left their respective rooms, appropriately dressed as they headed out, to be welcomed by a rather low-key standard carriage, which surprised Rui considering the fact that it was sent by an important dignitary of the Martial Union.

Chapter 872: Reze

('The fact that he doesn't want to draw attention is a good sign,') Rui mused. It indicated that the Martial Union wanted to keep whatever matter it wanted to discuss low. Sending in a Kandrian carriage from the local Martial Union embassy was probably not the most subtle manner to go about it. Such movements would obviously be noticed instantly.

As for the topic that this Martial Commissioner Reze wanted to speak to the two of them, Rui already more or less knew what it was. He prepared himself mentally for a heavy conversation as the two of them reached the carriage.

His eyes narrowed when he realized that his ordinary senses could not particularly penetrate the carriage effectively as they normally would. Although it looked like an ordinary multi-passenger carriage, it was clearly fashioned for more than just ordinary transport if it was equipped with sensory-jamming esoteric technology.

Still, it didn't pose any hindrance to Rui's Riemannian Echo. Inside he sensed a man accompanied by two subordinate staff members.

('Is that...?')

His question was answered when he entered the carriage along with Kane, sitting opposite him. It wasn't until the door closed that the man sitting opposite them addressed the two of them.

"Squire Quarrier, Squire Kane, I am Martial Commissioner Reze." The man displayed a sincere smile. "It is a pleasure to meet two of the most promising Martial Squires of your generation. I have heard much about the two of you, especially you Squire Quarrier. Tales of your feats and contributions to our Union have spread even when you were a mere Martial Apprentice. I'm happy to have met the two of you who will surely go on to become pillars of the Martial Union and our nation."

The man's attitude was welcoming and soft. Despite his far greater authority, he did not put on airs or look down on them.

This was within Rui's expectations. He already knew that the Martial Union's code of conduct for non-Martial Artist employees, regardless of their rank, was strict. The Martial Union was an organization for Martial Artists through and through, thus it ensured that non-Martial Artists in power or otherwise would never use their position against the Martial Artists members of the Martial Union directly or indirectly. There were even strict guidelines against employing intimidation against younger and weaker Martial Artists such as Martial Apprentices.

He had already experience with commissioner Derun. She too had treated Rui hospitably despite having greater power and authority than he did. All of the human employees he had ever dealt with always acted with deference towards Martial Artists regardless of how great or humble their authority was.

It appeared that Commissioner Reze was no different.

"You flatter me," Rui replied perfunctorily with a mild smile, as Kane simply nodded in concurrence.

He was comfortable being Rui's hype man while Rui dealt with the Martial Union.

"I'm sure you must be quite curious as to why I wanted to speak to you with such short notice," The man smiled amicably. "I will get right into it immediately. We have made some shocking discoveries recently. Discoveries pertaining to the two of you, you see."

He paused for a moment, observing their reactions.

Rui was completely inscrutable. Commissioner Reze was impressed that he was able to mask his reactions so well, even if he knew that Rui had undergone diplomatic training. Kane on the other hand, also did well due to his background in covert missions which required some training in non-verbal communication.

"You see, this is classified information, but I have been authorized to tell you that the Martial Union has been invited by Chairman Deacon to join an alliance that will cooperate together to take down the Voider, one way or another," The man replied amicably. "The Martial Union was provided with intelligence on the Voider by Chairman Deacon. It was only when we noticed some similarities between the techniques of the Voider and a certain external member of our Union, did we start looking into the matter deeply. Long story short, a full-blow investigation led us to a pair of individuals who have been

evaluated by our Intelligence Department as extremely likely candidates for the identity of the Voider. Isn't that amazing, Squire Quarrier?"

The man smiled gently.

Neither Rui nor Kane responded immediately.

"Ah, this carriage possessed the finest anti-espionage esoteric technology, based on certain esoteric substances that you yourselves should be familiar with," The man explained. "Furthermore, I myself have come here through extremely covert means. Not even the Embassy is aware of my presence here. No one is, outside of these two staff members."

He referred to the chief of staff and his secretary sitting beside him.

"Do not be afraid of any data leaks either," The commissioner informed him. "We have taken extraordinarily prudent steps ahead of time to ensure that none one is aware of the information that I have just divulged here."

He finally stopped, waiting for Rui to reply.

Rui sighed. "I assume it was a combination of the Void Step technique, as well as our transaction history and a deeper investigation into our locations that revealed something was off, correct?"

The man raised an eyebrow. "That's exactly it, actually."

Rui sighed. Although he had done a good job throwing them off, he did not think that his preparations could be able to throw off the intelligence department of the Martial Union forever. The problem was that their intelligence-gathering ability was extraordinarily deep, and he would need to spend years preparing, and even expend a lot of capital if he wanted to truly throw them off. The measures he had taken were much more rudimentary in comparison.

"As for the high probability evaluation of those two suspects being the Voider, that probably came from rigorous tracking of our presence and movements, more than anything, correct?"

"Right again," The man nodded. "Frankly, your counter-intelligence measures were impressive. You very correctly understood the protocols of the system of intelligence gathering of our Intelligence Department, and very cleverly exploited the limits of our passive intelligence gathering capabilities. The Intelligence Department has even made adjustments to its second-hand intelligence network systems in light of this event. We cannot afford to be fooled so easily, after all."

Chapter 873: Offer

"Frankly, you surprise us time and time again, Squire Quarrier," The man began speaking a little more freely. "I have spent many years working with many Martial Artists, yet I have never come across an individual like you. Frankly, if not for the confidential information that we had on you, we probably would never have even noticed. You most likely took this measure to throw off foreign parties who may be looking into the Voider, or even native Kandrian forces, and you most certainly accomplished that."

"You flatter me," Rui replied simply. "You've made your point, Commissioner Reze. I admit to nothing as of this moment. However, I am interested in hearing what you are actually here for. I am aware that you did not go through all the trouble of coming here in such a clandestine manner only to brag about how you allegedly found us. Please continue on to the main point."

Rui knew the Martial Union well enough to know that they would not use any heavy-handed methods to stop him. The biggest reason for that is because that would cross lines that they themselves had set with the expressed intent of never crossing in order to build a reputation and track record of being trustworthy with their word and not overbearingly domineering.

Forcefully halting the entirely legal international business ventures of one of its external members when it possessed absolutely no right or directive to do so was an extremely gross violation of a number of rights of a very gifted and promising Martial Squire. Even if they were willing to risk the credibility that they had painstakingly built over long periods of time, such a move could not be hidden from everybody and would spread like wildfire in many circles in the Kandrian Empire.

This gave Rui a lot of leeway. He knew that even if they knew, there was nothing they could do to him.

Or to be more precise, it was not worth shattering their credibility in a gross violation of his rights as an organization that was created to protect them. Even if they halted him, it wasn't as though they would instantly start succeeding in the Shionel Dungeon just because the Voider was gone.

Even if they did, the material benefits would not be worth it.

Of course, Rui was very well cognizant of the fact that everybody had a price. For example, if the Martial Union found out that he could exponentially increase the rate of breakthroughs to the Apprentice Realm, then the Martial Union would not even hesitate in the slightest to detain him.

Still, this situation wasn't anywhere nearly as extreme as that.

They could not afford to use the stick, thus which left them with a carrot.

"You're perceptive, Squire Quarrier," The man smiled. "You are correct. The main reason that I am here today is to make you an offer."

"I am listening,"

The man paused for a moment before his demeanor became more serious. "Things are going to get rougher for the Voider from here on out. Chairman Deacon has roped in all the freelancers and independent Martial Squires with a bounty that grows larger almost every day. He has united the merchants of the esoteric supplier industry local to the Shionel Confederation in their mutual interests to get rid of the Voider that has infringed and dominated their sector, as well as foreign suppliers. He has also roped foreign stakeholders with a special interest in the esoteric supplies of the dungeon, such as nations interested in them for national interests, these are strategic substances after all."

He paused for a moment. "Frankly, the probability that it is going to overwhelm the Voider, at one point or the other, is not low. Frankly, I'm still amazed by the sheer amount of success that the Voider has achieved, it's utterly baffling now that we have come across the true identities of the Voider. It's even more surprising how they managed to lock in the biggest bigshot in the nation to partner with them, and even pass a bill for their sake. However, it's clear that that connection will not be able to protect the Voider."

"What if the Voider is extremely confident in their capabilities?" Rui shrugged.

"We would be surprised, yet we would bid the Voider good luck," The man shook his head. "We do not act against one of our own. You may have a dim view of our motivations, but ultimately the Martial Union exists for Martial Artists and Martial Art. The proposal that we have to offer is truly in the mutual interests of both sides."

Rui didn't respond immediately.

He had to admit that he was feeling the pressure recently. It was literally as though the whole world, or the parts of it close enough to matter, was against them. Besides from Guildmaster Bradt, it seemed as though everybody inside and outside the Shionel Confederation was his enemy and was hunting him alive.

"I'm open to considering your proposal," Rui spoke openly this time, dropping the pretenses. "But that doesn't mean I will take it. If I decide not to, then I won't."

"That is understandable, Squire Quarrier," The man smiled eagerly. "The proposal I have for you entails an exchange of aid, relief, and protection from the aggressive search for the Voider that Chairman Deacon has set out on, in exchange for a cut of the resources of your harvests, as well as some other minor conditions. We can get into the specifics if you want, but essentially, The Martial Union can accept Chairman Deacon's offer and will join the alliance and engage in just the right amount of sabotage to guarantee that they never catch on to you without revealing themselves. We can drastically obscure your traces, misdirect their attention, confuse the investigation with well-timed misinformation, and engage in a lot of counter-intelligence sabotage. You can rest assured in the capabilities of our Covert Operations Department, we have excellent agents and Martial Artists, as I'm sure you know firsthand."

Chapter 874: Concerns

Rui did know. He made extensive use of the intelligence and covert operation teams assigned to him on Vilun Island. That's why he knew they were definitely competent.

Still, that didn't mean it was going to be easy.

"They are most certainly reliable," Rui replied. "However, the same can be said for the covert operatives and intelligence agents that are going to be employed by Chairman Deacon and his little alliance."

"Most certainly," Commissioner Reze smiled, nodding. "However, let me remind you, our goal is to engage in just the necessary amount of targeted sabotage to ensure that they don't find you. That doesn't mean we need to sabotage every step of every endeavor they engage in, we're concerned with those that are on the right track."

Rui was already aware of this, and he had to admit, it made sense. Chairman Deacon and his minions would need to be juggling a vast amount of data on the matter, but the only data that the Martial Union would be focused on would be information surrounding Rui and Kane. They needed to engage in just the right amount of sabotage surrounding the most crucial parts of the investigation, and they could continue about normally for all other matters for the most part.

"Still, this would require the full cooperation of the Covert Operations Department of the Martial Union, correct?" Rui asked, before continuing. "That means an entire department within the Martial Union is going to get involved, and the number of people who are going to be aware of the secret is going to inflate significantly, this is necessarily going to increase the risk that there will be a data leak and our identities will be revealed. And it is going to be the two of us who will end up paying the price, not the Martial Union."

It didn't matter how careful the Martial Union was. The greater the number of people who were aware of the secret, the greater the probability that the secret would eventually spill. It could happen in a number of ways. It could be the case that the Martial Union had spies in it that could leak the identity of the Voider to one of the parties that had accepted Chairman Deacon's alliance.

It could be that an operative of the Martial Union could be captured in the process of sabotage, and the data would be leaked, or it could be that the Martial Union's sabotage as a whole would end up being leaked, and they would realize that the Martial Union had some kind of connection to the Voider, jeopardizing Rui and Kane even more.

"Those concerns are also valid," Commissioner Reze nodded. "However, we will not be employing the entirety of the Covert Operations Department for this matter. That's not only risky for the reasons you mentioned, but there are guidelines and protocols in place as well as oversight from authorities who possess deep expertise in this field. Most likely we'll employ a team of intelligence agents who will genuinely be tasked with earnestly aiding Chairman Deacon with finding a Voider, and there will be a separate highly clandestine team of covert operatives whose goal is to sabotage the intelligence agents of the Martial Union that will be aiding Chairman Deacon with the investigations as well as the entire process as a whole. This is a generally common tactic that we employ in double-agent operations, to put it simply. It is exceedingly difficult to employ, but we have developed a sophisticated means of doing so thanks to the nature of our organization. The philosophy of fooling your enemies by fooling friends and even yourself is something we rigorously use in sophisticated sabotage operations such as this."

Rui was impressed. That was definitely a lot more sophisticated than he was expecting from the Martial Union, although it didn't completely relieve him, it was definitely more assuring than if they engaged in more straightforward and scrutable manners of investigation.

Still, that didn't mean Rui had no more concerns left. He would be a fool if he let some nice words spoken in a short conversation put to rest all potential issues.

"Even if it were the case that you could assure the security of our identities in this manner, that does not mean you'll be given the chance to, Commissioner Reze," Rui replied.

The man's eyebrows knitted a little in confusion. "I'm afraid I don't follow, Squire Quarrier."

"There will obviously be a clash of interest for the Martial Union if the Martial Union investigates one of its own external members for being the Voider," Rui elaborated. "How can Chairman Deacon trust you to investigate your own members, especially if the investigation's outcomes could lead to the death of said members? If I can see the conflict of interests, then surely Chairman Deacon can as well. No nation can be trusted to investigate the candidates of the true identity of the Voider that are in association with those nations."

Commissioner Reze smiled. "You lack a complete grasp of Chairman Deacon's perspective, I'm afraid, partly because you do not have as much of an access to his intelligence as we do, nor his plans. Chairman Deacon is convinced that while the Voider may be a citizen or a member of any of the nations or organizations that he has rallied, he has absolutely certain that the Voider is not being patroned, supported, or partnered with any of the nations and organizations that he had rallied. He has strong reasons to believe this."

Rui immediately understood what the commissioner meant. "If the Voider was backed by a nation, it would be in the Voider's and the nation's interests to publicize it as a form of deterrence. Since killing the Voider would be no different from a declaration of war with that nation, which instantly complicates things and significantly disincentivizes killing the Voider. This is especially for an organization like the Kandrian Martial Union, an extremely powerful sage-level organization and a bigshot anywhere within a ten thousand kilometers radius."

Chapter 875: Hagglng

Rui understood the entirety of what Commissioner Reze was getting at and more with just a single hint.

"So in Chairman Deacon's mind, the way that the Voider has operated, colluding with Guildmaster Bradt and not using any backer's power as a deterrence, is a very strong indication that the Voider is an independent entity that found a winning strategy," Rui continued. "He has plenty of reasons to think that the Voider has zero foreign backings, especially not a bigshot like the Kandrian Martial Union. The Kandrian Martial Union would openly declare the Voider as one of its own to prevent anybody from messing with the Voider. Barring the three other powerhouse nations, nobody has the balls to pick a fight with the Kandrian Martial Union."

"Correct," The man nodded. "Not just that, but the fact that the Martial Union has materially suffered at the expense of the Voider's dominant success is also a strong reason to not doubt the Martial Union's interests and commitment. Chairman Deacon believes that we would never support the Voider while incurring such lackluster success ourselves, the best part is that he is correct, we would never have done such a thing. It is simply highly suboptimal and detrimental to us, and thus not our style, we would never have conceived of such a plan."

He gave Rui a gentle but pointed look.

"I'm not liable. It's not my fault you're unable to keep up," Rui shook his head. "Send stronger Martial Squires next time."

Commissioner Reze laughed in response. "Only someone like you has the capital to rightfully say that. Your absurd success has put even our finest grade-ten Martial Squires to success. Frankly, we're still curious as to how you're able to perform such amazing feats in the Shionel Dungeon. Would you be interested in divulging your techniques, strategies, and tactics to us? We will remunerate you appropriately for such valuable means to traverse the Shionel Dungeon."

"You would not be able to use the most crucial parts of our modus operandi, I promise," Rui replied.

He was also unwilling to sell his winning formula to others even if they could replicate it, it was the means by which he intended to fulfill his objective, and giving to the Martial Union would not only make his job harder, it would make him less valuable since they would be able to replicate his success on a larger scale.

"That's a shame," Commissioner Reze commented, not pursuing it any further. "But that's beside the main point. Regarding the agreement, I trust you have no more issues?"

Rui wanted to object, but he had no more principal objections, at most they would haggle over the details. He had to admit that it was a sound proposal that benefited both parties significantly. His challenge was limited to the Shionel Dungeon and the hurdles that lay within. He had not intended to challenge himself in the political domain, certainly not to challenge himself against an alliance that contained tons of powerful forces all looking to hunt him.

It would benefit him greatly if he could leave that part to the Martial Union's assuring capabilities.

"Alright," he sighed. "I tentatively accept your offer, but we still need to have out all the details. I refuse to go in blind. Exactly what proportion of the harvest are you looking to get?"

"Well, we were considering fifty percent of the total haul," Commissioner Reze stated.

Rui almost burst out laughing at the absurd amount that the man cited.

The fact that he demanded such a high amount for some basic sabotage was absolutely hilarious.

The money that Rui earned from his harvests was not low. The esoteric substances harvested from the Shionel Dungeon were sold in milligrams because of how expensive and valuable they were. Rui routinely dragged out gigantic boulders of pure esoteric ore deposits. He was earning major shares of what was essentially the equivalent of a major multi-billion dollar industry in this world.

Fifty percent of that was simply far greater than what he was getting back. However, the biggest issue was not Rui's desire for wealth, the greatest factor was that he was already giving fifty percent of the wealth to Bradt Distribution Services. He could not give the remaining to the Martial Union even if he wanted because he needed it to fund the sheer expenses of his dimensional storage ring which required a huge amount of wealth to sustain. If not for the fact that he was earning gigantic amounts of wealth, he would not be able to sustain regular use of the dimensional storage ring due to how much energy it cost.

He couldn't give away all of it even if he wanted.

"The services the Martial Union are providing materially are not worth more than ten percent and I'm sure you know that," Rui snorted.

"Perhaps," The man did not deny Rui's words. "However, I'm sure you realize that the reason we are demanding so much is that you need these basic services you claim are only worth ten percent. That increases their value, and our bargaining strength."

Rui could not deny those words. He did want them a lot even if he didn't explicitly need them, in comparison, he did not mind if he was slightly less filthy rich than he currently was.

"Still, I cannot give you fifty percent, it is actually impossible due to reasons I cannot specify. You can think of it as me possessing only fifty percent of what I harvest, monetarily speaking I think fifteen percent is appropriate," Rui replied.

"Forty percent," Commissioner Reze lowered his precise.

"Twenty percent,"

"Thirty,"

"Twenty-five," Rui retorted. "And that's my absolute limit, I'd be making close to less than the Martial Union if I go any lower."

Commissioner Reze nodded, agreeing to the matter. "Twenty-five percent it is, then. We can work with that."

"You mentioned other conditions, did you not?" Rui recalled. "What exactly are they?"

"Ah, well, really we have one condition. We would like for you to avoid supplying esoteric resources to these Kandrian Empire-based companies." He reached his hand out to his secretary, who pulled a document and passed it on to him.

Chapter 876: Underworld

Rui frowned at the odd condition as he accepted the document. "You want me to randomly not sell to these companies, individuals, and organizations? Why not?"

"That is none of your business," Commissioner Reze shook his head.

"I think it is, commissioner," Rui narrowed his eyes. "I have enough enemies already, as it is. You're asking me to make even more. I definitely have the right to demand to know why."

This was definitely a good reason that Rui could use to push the Martial Commissioner. Commissioner Reze considered Rui's words before, simply nodding. "Very well, I can inform you of the reason why. The reasoning is simple, it is because they are ours and the Kandrian Government's biggest competition and threat in the competition for the esoteric substances of the Shionel Dungeon. Thus we wish to restrict them from being your customers entirely."

Rui frowned even deeper.

A bunch of companies, organizations, and rich patrons were the biggest threat to the Kandrian Government and the Martial Union?

He failed to understand why, or even how.

"You're going to have to explain that, I'm afraid," Rui stated, more curious than anything. "How exactly are they, enemies of the government, and of the Martial Union?"

The man considered his words for a few seconds before replying. "This has to do with the nature and structure of the power blocs within the Kandrian Empire. But to put it short, it is not the foreign nations that are our biggest competitors, and our most pressing enemies. The biggest threat comes from within.

The Royal Family and the Martial Union are the two most powerful entities in the Kandrian Empire, however, do you know what the third most powerful entity would be?"

Rui's eyes narrowed as he understood where this was going. "The Underworld."

The underworld was a blanket term for sectors, markets, and even industries surrounding goods and services that were illegal for a variety of reasons.

Human trafficking, prostitution, money laundering, smuggling, and sale of prohibited substances, etc, were strictly prohibited in the Kandrian Empire.

Yet a fundamental rule of humanity was where there was demand, there was supply. The underworld encompassed a large number of illegal commercial endeavors for which there were huge markets. These endeavors were so profitable that entire sectors and industries were established and maintained and hidden in secrecy. All of these were collectively referred to as the Underworld.

"You catch on quickly," The commissioner smiled. "I should warn you, we're entering extremely sensitive territory here. However, you are correct. The Underworld is the third-most powerful force in the Kandrian Empire as far as Martial and military power go, and they are collectively even wealthier than the Martial Union. They are the biggest thorns in the necks of both the Royal Family and the Martial Union."

Rui wasn't satisfied with that explanation.

"I can understand why the Royal Family and the Kandrian Government hate them, but why does the Martial Union dislike them?" Rui wondered. "There should be no clash of interests as far as I'm aware."

The Martial Union existed for the mutual interests of Martial Artists as a class in many ways. The Underworld was simply the sectors and industries born to provide supply to the large demand for illegal goods and services. There was no overt clash of interests as far as Rui could see.

"Ah but there are clashes of interests," The commissioner smiled. "There is a black market for any service that is criminalized..."

Rui immediately understood what he meant. "Illegal Martial Art services. Martial violence."

"Exactly," The man nodded. "Not everyone is happy with the Martial Union's tame services in comparison. We do not accept offensive missions that are restricted to within the nation, nor do we accept covert missions for the same. There are many who wish to be able to commission Martial Artists to hurt or kill other humans or even other Martial Artists."

Rui considered some of the missions that he had undertaken in the past. The Martial Apprentice that killed Bella Hier, his very first client, and the Martial Apprentice that had captured and trafficked humans, were both most likely part of the Underworld in hindsight.

"The Underworld, being more profitable than the Martial Union gig, must attract some Martial Artists," Rui murmured. "That's the clash of interests, they steal the Martial Artists that the Martial Academies worked hard to create."

"Exactly," Commissioner Reze nodded. "Our interests are irreconcilable, and we at the very least do not want to see them empowered. Particularly the Martial Don of the Six Dons of the Underworld, a Martial Artist who has assumed control over the entire black market for illegal Martial Artist services across the entire Kandrian Empire."

Rui's eyes widened as he came across a lot of information that he had never across before. "I've never heard of that."

"It's something that isn't public knowledge, but I have chosen to disclose the basics to you," Commissioner Reze informed him. "But coming back to your original question. The Six Dons of the Underworld have a strong interest in many of the esoteric substances that emerge from the Shionel Dungeon. For reasons I'm sure you've already figured out by now."

Rui did have a good idea of what the man was referring to. "The sensory jamming properties of esoteric substances of the Shionel Dungeon. It makes surveillance and monitoring much harder, and technology fashioned from it will greatly benefit the Underworld's activities."

"Exactly," The man nodded.

"And the reason you want to ban these companies, organizations, and individuals from purchasing from my Esosale Suppliers is that they probably have some connection to the Underworld, correct?" Rui sighed.

"Correct," The man nodded. "They are companies and organizations that are entirely legal and cannot be targeted by the law enforcement of the nation, and they are controlled by the Underworld and are one of the biggest ways in which the Underworld is acquiring esoteric substances of the Shionel Dungeon. Thus, we would like for you to halt any sale to them."

Chapter 877: Acceptance

Rui was aware of the existence of the underworld and the mafia, however, he did not know that they were such a significant force in the Kandrian Empire. In hindsight, he should have known given the fact that it was almost human nature.

He could see why the Martial Union disliked the Underworld. The Martial Union spent a lot of capital and resources on the sixteen Martial Academies that rigorously trained Martial Artists in hopes that each generation would join and empower the Martial Union. It must be a sore sight to see the Underworld reel in a minority of its investments for its own use.

The unfortunate fact of the matter was that one could probably make more wealth through the Underworld, although there was a huge slew of detriments to doing that.

Rui skimmed through the document listing all the third parties that the Martial Union wanted Rui to avoid servicing. The list was quite big, though Rui was sure that these third parties were not the only 'faces' that the Underworld had through which they could legitimately purchase esoteric substances. Still, if Rui barred any sale from Esosale Suppliers to these third parties, then he was sure the Underworld would suffer a blow to a certain extent.

That would instantly make him and Esosale Suppliers the enemy of the entirety of the Underworld of the Shionel Confederation. He was sharp enough to realize that the Martial Union was hoping for this, to a certain extent. Rui was cognizant enough to evaluate the Martial Union's offer from the context of their incentives and interests.

By having Rui agree to this agreement, they would forever cut away any possibility of Rui joining the Underworld, especially the so-called Martial Don. This would be a highly undesirable outcome for the Martial Union, and one they might fear.

The reason for this was that as much power wealth Rui could accumulate through legitimate means, he could probably gain even more if he joined the Underworld with the capabilities he currently possessed.

Rui scoffed inwardly, although from the high-minded and distant Martial Union's perspective, this may be a possibility to fear, to Rui at least, this was almost an impossibility. Rui disdained to inflict meaningless and needless suffering. He had the Orphanage to think about as well, he couldn't engage in such activities by virtue of them simply existing.

On top of that, having been born and brought up with many children, he hated people who inflicted suffering on children, and he knew firsthand that the Underworld was willing to sink to such depths. That alone was enough for him to never want to have any ties with them.

And that alone was enough for him to accept this offer even if it meant antagonizing the Underworld.

"Hm?" Rui's eyes narrowed as he read a familiar name that was especially highlighted on the list of Underworld associates.

DiViliers Manufacturers.

"This..."

He recalled this name. Charles DiViliers, the chairman and founder of the largest producers of Martial Art-related goods, as well as services surrounding those goods. His company engaged in an immense amount of research and development on Martial Art-related goods such as equipment, gear, utilities, training, and growth resources before selling them in large numbers.

His products were so effective that they were deemed of strategic value, and he was sanctioned from selling internationally in the interests of National security. Furthermore, both the Kandrian Military and the Martial Union valued his products so much that they signed extensive and lucrative contracts, turning him into the military contractor equivalent of the Kandrian Empire.

Rui had already known that this man likely had ties with the Underworld. The reason for this was that he recognized the golden-haired and-eyed man that had engaged in banditry as one of his subordinates.

"Ah, Charles DiViliers and Diviliers Manufacturers. They certainly are one of Esosale Suppliers' biggest clients," Commissioner Reze nodded.

Rui had not been aware of that. He simply let Guildmaster Bradt handle all the clientele in place of Rui. This was the agreement that the two of them had come to. Rui simply pumped in all the juice while Guildmaster Bradt handled everything else that came with running a company like Esosale Suppliers.

"I accept," Rui shut the document.

Although Martial Commissioner Reze did not let his perfunctory smile so much as twitch, Rui could feel with Primordial Instinct that the man had been surprised that Rui had accepted so easily. He could tell that the Martial Commissioner had been prepared to engage in some persuasion about how bad the Underworld was, and how it was a threat to Rui's interests as well as that of the Martial Union.

However, Rui was smart enough to have figured out all of that, and more, in an instant.

"Wonderful," Martial Commissioner Reze smiled. "The Martial Union will surely reward you for your seamless cooperation. Now then, let us flesh out all of the details and sign the contract at another time. Today I merely wished to confirm your intent to cooperate with this deal. I will contact you in a similar manner very soon and we'll meet up discreetly to finalize everything."

"Sure," Rui replied simply.

"Well then, I bid the both of you a good day," The man smiled as the door opened.

Rui and Kane bade him goodbye before heading back to their inn rooms.

"I thought the Martial Union would be more heavy-handed, to be honest," Kane remarked nonchalantly.

"They probably would have engaged in more subtle intimidation if it were any other Martial Squire," Rui was relatively certain that they would have employed some convincing bluffs had it been any other Martial Squire in so far as subtly exaggerating the gravity and the consequences of what the two of them had accomplished.

But Rui would not have fallen for such tricks, and he knew that they knew that. They had to go for a more transparent approach when it came to handling him, and so they did. Rui looked forward to signing the contract so that he feels more at ease, if not for anything else.

Chapter 878: Delivery

Martial Commissioner was not kidding when he said that he would contact them very soon. Twenty-four hours later, Rui and Kane were greeted by one of Martial Commissioner Reze's personal assistants, who conveyed to them the location of the meeting and requested the two of them visit the location discreetly.

Thankfully, the location that Commissioner Reze had chosen was close enough to the Shionel Dungeon that no Martial Senior could be anywhere near it. Which was relieving to Rui, since he was not afraid of martial Squires.

"There he is," Rui murmured as he used Riemannian Echo to detect Martial Commissioner Reze in a small building in a busy district, accompanied by his bodyguards. "The location he chose is hidden in plain sight, huh? No one would think that an extremely important and significant agreement would be officially signed here."

Furthermore, once again, his normal senses had trouble detecting the depths of the building. He appreciated that they had taken measures to obscure the happenings of the building. Yet at the same time, it wasn't too overt to draw attention.

If they stuffed it with enough anti-sensing esoteric technology then they would definitely attract more attention. After all, any martial Squire running their senses through the area would notice the void that came with the sensory jamming technology.

KNOCK KNOCK.

Rui and Kane knocked on the door after subtly having deactivated the Void Step technique and blending into the crowd.

The door opened as a Martial Squire carefully checked out their appearance before letting them in, through a few rooms before reaching a wide room with a large table at the center of it.

Martial Commissioner Reze smiled. "Welcome, Squire Quarrier, Squire Arrancar. I look forward to finalizing the agreement officially today. Please take a seat. I apologize for the obscure location of these talks, but I couldn't greet you in the Kandrian Embassy for reasons I'm sure you're aware of already."

Rui nodded. He was sure that the Kandrian Embassy was hardly a safe spot for such talks as far as privacy went. If they did hold the meeting in the Kandrian Embassy, then the fact that Rui and Kane were present in there would be revealed pretty quickly, or at the very least, a highly confidential meeting from some visitors in-state was occurring. Just the fact that it was the foreign embassy of the Kandrian Empire meant that the state would be paying a decent amount of surveillance to it.

"Now then, let us establish what we have already agreed to thus far," Commissioner Reze began. "We have established that in return for twenty-five percent of the harvest, we will engage in all counter-intelligence measures we can to sabotage the investigation from within the alliance that Chairman Deacon has put together, well as banning sale to the third parties that we have already provided to you. Do you have any objections to these?"

"No," Rui simply replied.

"Alright, then let us specify the means by which each side will fulfill our conditions," Commissioner Reze proceeded on. "Regarding the delivering of the esoteric ore harvests, we have several proposals in mind. Though, if you have any preferred method, then we may be willing to entertain that."

Rui shrugged. "I could bury it at a particular spot every time I harvest it, leaving it for you guys to pick up."

It was what he had been doing thus far, and it had worked fine thus far. Furthermore, given the fact that the Martial Union was already aware of his identity, he didn't need to change spots each time like he needed to when delivering esoteric ore supplies to Guildmaster Bradt.

Commissioner Reze considered the idea. "That could work... it would depend on the location."

The Martial Commissioner was less comfortable with this method of delivery than Guildmaster Bradt was. The difference in power that the two of them had within the nation was drastic. Guildmaster Bradt was extraordinarily powerful within the confines of the nations, thus such a method was not problematic to him since he possessed the ability to mitigate all the risks that came with it singlehandedly.

The same could not be said for the Martial Union when it came to matters so far from the Kandrian Empire in a powerful state where it did not have much foundation within at all. There were simply too many things that could go wrong, and they did not necessarily possess the ability to prevent it.

"Rather than burying it, could you deliver it to a location similar to this, one that isn't far away from the Shionel Dungeon and one that is under the implicit control of the Martial Union?" Commissioner Reze asked Rui.

"That works fine too," Rui shrugged.

This was actually more convenient, a live handover to the Martial Union was also now possible given that the Martial Union was aware of the identity of the Voider. This meant that there were a lot of conveniences that came with it.

Martial Commissioner Reze went on to specify a few more details and establish some protocols regarding the handover.

"I refuse to work with specialized comms devices to alert you of my schedule and harvests ahead of time," Rui flatly refused that condition.

"Things will be a lot smoother if we do it this way," Commissioner Reze raised an eyebrow.

"Once again, I refuse,"

"May I know why?"

"Because it adds another element of risk that is not within my control," Rui replied straightforwardly. "What if this special communication device ends up getting intercepted, or infiltrated? What if it is the reason that I draw suspicion to myself?"

"I assure you that this such a thing is extremely unlikely," Commissioner Reze frowned mildly.

"I appreciate that, but again, no," Rui shook his head. "Please have staff or personnel manning the drop location all day and night if that is what it takes. It's hardly an extra expense."

"Fine, we accept that condition," Commissioner Reze relented, seeing that Rui was unwilling to agree to this measure that he had drafted up.

Chapter 879: Planned

Soon enough, the two of them chalked up a simple but defined plan for the drop-off of the esoteric ore deposits that he owed the Martial Union. However, there was still more that needed to be ironed out as far as Rui was concerned.

"I want access to all information surrounding the investigation with the Voider," Rui mentioned.

Martial Commissioner maintained a straight face, but Rui could tell that he disliked what he was hearing.

"This is not recommended, Squire Quarrier," Commissioner Reze informed Rui. "You should leave the matters surrounding the investigation to us, and have faith in our capabilities."

"This isn't a matter of not having faith in the Martial Union's capabilities," Rui replied. "No matter how trustworthy your operations are, I find it more reassuring to also be informed on the happenings of the investigation. Should I feel that the direction of the investigation affects my interests, then I wish to be aware of that rather than not."

There was a moment of silence as Martial Commissioner simply stared at Rui expressionlessly.

Rui was actually aware of the reasons for the compunctions that the Commissioner had. He did not want Rui to make decisions based on the direction of the investigation. He was most likely afraid that Rui would simply quit the gig if he ever felt threatened by the direction of the investigation.

He was also afraid that Rui would crack under extreme pressure if he realized the investigation was making progress towards him, and make moves that would be extremely suspicious and draw the attention of the investigation.

He was probably also afraid that Rui would also make abrupt changes to throw off the investigation, but the timing of that would also be suspicious and alert Chairman Deacon of the fact that someone has access to classified information.

These were all valid concerns, and if Rui were in his place, he too would be concerned about these very matters as well. Still, Rui had displayed more than sufficient competencies, which was the reason he couldn't push back too hard using the excuse of Rui's lack of training in the handling of intelligence.

What he truly wanted to avoid was any uncertain variables, which definitively came with Rui gaining access to the investigation reports himself. Commissioner Reze simply could not be sure what he was going to do in certain circumstances.

"Let me remind you, Commissioner Reze," Rui firmly spoke up. "That this isn't an internal mission from the Martial Union. This is a partnership that the Martial Union approached me with, not the other way around."

Commissioner Reze sighed inwardly, although he didn't so much twitch outwardly. The problem was that Rui was right, the Martial Union was not the one with the highest bargaining power in the matter. Normally, such circumstances only occurred with Martial Artists of the Upper Realms. Normally, only they possessed the might to speak to the mighty Martial Union on a more equal standing. Martial Squires did not possess this right as they simply possessed no bargaining power whatsoever, comparatively speaking.

Rui was the first Martial Squire of the Martial Union to have ever possessed such bargaining power with the Union. The appearance of the Shionel Dungeon artificially elevated the value of Martial Squires to

closer to that of Martial Seniors, however, this single Martial Squire capitalized and dominated the Shionel Dungeon so impressively that he managed to break free from this pattern.

He truly was unable to refuse Rui's demand. It was reasonable given that this was a partnership, and it directly affected his interests thus he had every right to demand it, furthermore, he possessed the competencies to ensure that he would not end up sabotaging himself by acting in an ill-advised manner.

Commissioner Reze simply did not possess the capital to deny him.

"Alright, Squire Quarrier," He nodded. "We accept that condition. Let us iron out the manner in which we should handle the delivery of the reports on the investigation. We would recommend that you do not carry hard copies of any reports back to your inn, that is highly ill-advised as that is liable to have you caught."

"I'm aware of that," Rui wasn't a fool. "I already have a solution. Bury the documents in a specific part of the dungeon. I'll dig it up, memorize it, and destroy them."

Commissioner Reze was aware that Rui had mastered the Mind Palace technique to a high level of mastery. So he wasn't surprised by Rui's ability to memorize it. Still, he had other issues with the solution that Rui had proposed.

"How will you find it once you enter the dungeon? How would we know to bury it in that exact place?" Commissioner raised an eyebrow. Rui acted as though the Shionel Dungeon was not a terribly difficult place to navigate with highly hampered senses and messed up internal compasses and clocks.

Rui straightforwardly confirmed this.

"The Shionel Dungeon is transparent to me, I will be fine," Rui shook his head. "I'll provide you with a map that will aid with directing you to the same place each time."

This time, Commissioner Reze's eyes widened as a lot of oddities surrounding this entire case began making sense to him.

The ability to map the Shionel Dungeon was nothing short of groundbreaking. Within the Shionel Confederation, it was a priceless asset, a national treasure. The one and only means to travel the Shionel Dungeon without spending stupendously large amounts of time, or losing one's way. In the mind-breaking maze of the Shionel Dungeon.

He was starting to understand how Rui roped in the most powerful person in the Shionel Confederation as his business partner given this new information. He had to admit, he underestimated Rui's capabilities. Given how long Esosale Suppliers had been active and how long they had been in the country, it meant that Rui had secured Guildmaster Bradt's aid immediately. This suggests that he had been planning to do so for a very long time.

Then when he considered the fact that Rui's transaction history with the Martial Union indicated research into the Shionel Confederation almost six months before he left the Kandrian Empire, he realized that Rui had planned everything from the very beginning.

Chapter 880: Concluded

This realization assured that at the very least someone so shrewd would most likely not make blunders under pressure, most likely. That on top of the fact that Martial Artists were generally capable of retaining composure under the threat of life changed his mind about allowing Rui access to the investigation being a bad idea.

Shortly after, the two of them fleshed out the details of the agreements, as well as how the agreement would proceed in certain cases. Commissioner Reze negotiated for the ability to update the list of mafia-related companies, as the Underworld would certainly adapt quickly to the bans and restrictions.

In return, Rui obtained a promise to help him smuggle the wealth he earned from the Shionel Confederation back to the Kandrian Empire.

Unfortunately for Rui, digital transactions were not really a thing on the Panama Continent. This meant that all transactions required a physical exchange of currency and goods/services to some degree.

This was where Rui was in a pickle. He needed to somehow transfer all of the revenue he made in the Shionel Confederation to the Kandrian Empire. This was one of the few things the difficulty of which he hadn't entirely foreseen. He had expected to rile up the market, most certainly, but he had

underestimated how violent of a reaction there would have been. He most certainly did not expect a jaw-dropping bounty to be placed on him that early, nor did he predict Chairman Deacon literally forming a gigantic alliance as though the man was preparing to wage an all-out war.

This vastly raised the difficulty of Rui withdrawing the fruits of his labor and successfully leaving the nation with it. The hardest problem would be using it anywhere. Thanks to the new system that Guildmaster Bradt had put in place. He had the ability to withdraw money for his expenses thanks to the anonymous withdrawal in place in the new protocols that Guildmaster instated with Bill C-16.

However, withdrawing all of his income in one go was not something that was easy to hide. He would need to be extremely careful with that, such a drastic reduction in Esosale Suppliers' net worth would not go unnoticed. If Chairman Deacon was really aggressive he could immediately launch a thorough investigation near the Merchant Guilds to gain a list of all people who were in the bank at the time of withdrawal.

Meaning Rui would need to use Void Step to a certain extent when he did leave. On top of that, he would need to immediately evacuate to the dungeon.

However, that was only the first problem. The second problem was how he would eventually get all of that wealth past the borders and finally deposit all that money in his own personal account in the Martial Union with as few people realizing what had happened.

These were all future problems that were becoming increasingly difficult to solve. Furthermore, some of these problems couldn't simply be solved by Martial Art techniques. What Rui needed was an organization to aid him with ensuring that the consolidation of his money could happen without alerting Chairman Deacon.

"We can certainly aid you with that, Squire Quarrier," Commissioner Reze smiled. "Rest assured we can transfer the revenue you've made from the Shionel Confederation to your personal account in the Martial Union without revealing your identity. This is a bit out of protocol, but we can accommodate that in this particular case."

The Martial Union had no qualms about aiding Rui to transfer the fruits of his labor to his holdings account in the Martial Union. Considering that Rui would basically be the effective equivalent of a billionaire once he successfully consolidated all of his revenue, this would definitely impact the Martial Union in a positive manner.

The details were hashed out rather smoothly from then on. Both sides had gotten what they wanted and proceeded to flesh out all the details of their agreement.

Soon enough, it was time to draft the contract.

"... And there we go," Rui lightly commented as he finished signing the documents after Kane.

"It's official now," Commissioner Reze smiled. "We look forward to working with you, Squire Quarrier. As long as we both do our respective jobs, we will both mutually flourish."

"I will strive to ensure that happens," Rui nodded, shaking his hand. "Now then, if there's nothing else, we'll take our leave. We have a dungeon to clear."

Rui and Kane bade them goodbye as they Void Stepped away from the location, heading back towards their inn together.

"Good thing we got the support of the Martial Union huh," Kane commented lightly. He simply let Rui hash things out, this whole thing had been his idea and endeavor in the first place. Kane was just tagging along for the ride for a variety of reasons.

"Indeed, but that doesn't mean that our problems will all just disappear," Rui remarked lightly. Think about it, they're just making it much harder for Chairman Deacon to find us, but we may run into new problems with this contract if we're not careful."

('The Underworld... They might be even more dangerous than Chairman Deacon, especially when I return to the Kandrian Empire after all of this is over,') Rui narrowed his eyes.

He wasn't familiar with the Underworld of the Kandrian Empire and how it was, but if it was anything like how it was back on Earth, then he didn't dare underestimate them. He needed to be even more careful now since he was effectively turning them into his enemies by continuously hampering them. The good news was that they were even much less likely to find Rui than Chairman Deacon was.

"Are we going to head back to the dungeon immediately?" Kane asked.

"Yeah, Chairman Deacon has been ramping up his exploration efforts," Rui remarked. "We need to work even harder to ensure that our exploration is always ahead of his. We have an edge due to a headstart with my Riemannian Echo, but that won't remain forever. It needs to be maintained."