

Martial Unity 391

Chapter 391: Gathering

"It's odd that they're grouping up so much the deeper you go into the forest," Rui murmured.

What was driving the migration of fauna toward the center of the Serevian Plateau? The mission bill had mentioned changes in the migration patterns of the fauna in the Serevian Plateau. Rui wondered if they were referring to this.

"Anyways, is it about time I begin?" Rui murmured to himself as he glanced to the right gazing down at a lake.

He was required to use the bio-recon surveillance device at eight points equally distanced from each other and the center of the Serevian Plateau to gather data on various environmental parameters. Furthermore, he had to do this multiple times at different distances from the center of the Serevian Plateau. Essentially, he would be taking environmental data along effectively all portions of the Serevian Plateau at a certain distance from a certain point onwards.

As for how he knew whether he was at the required distance to conduct the eight-point empirical surveillance, he would refer to topological features on the map and get a roughly accurate estimate of the distance from the center of the Serevian Plateau. Once that happened, even if he was roughly off, he would more or less obtain the data he wanted to obtain.

Since there was no such thing as GPS or satellites that would allow him to reach the exact position, such practices were common and really the only norm.

He navigated a bit relative to the lake until he stopped.

"Right about here should be fine." He nodded. He plucked out his bio-recon device and planted it into the ground as per protocols, before hitting a few buttons.

The device immediately buzzed and whirred. Rui watched on with interest as he felt the insertion of a thin needle dig into the soil and the extraction of soil with Seismic mapping. The bio-recon device had taken an incredibly thin but deep soil sample. The next step involved some more button pressing and

different positioning. It took him several minutes until he had collected the required data at that particular point. He moved on to the other points, using the same practice of moving relative to topographical features to find his spot.

It wasn't easy, as he constantly ran into other beasts and creatures. He promptly fought them away testing his prowess against different types of creatures.

The diversity in fauna gave him a lot of data on how the Flowing Void Style performed against vastly differing species. There were several conclusions he had been able to draw.

First, the predictive model was surprisingly effective against the various creatures that he squared off against. It seemed that he was able to eventually predict their motions with close to the same degree that he predicted humans.

It was surprising, but in hindsight, he should have expected it. The predictive model was merely just applying statistics and probability to motions and inferring the probabilities of possible moves based on existing patterns of motions.

Thus, it could effectively be applied to any dataset of motions within a closed system. This was a relief to Rui, it meant he would not need to change the predictive model all that much in order to adapt to the world of Gaia.

However, the same couldn't be said for the adaptive evolution model. The model that outputted the correct counter move to the predicted move by the prediction model. This model was incompatible with non-human animals.

However, it was more complicated than that, Rui learned. The adaptive evolution model was varyingly incompatible with non-human opponents. For example, it retained a portion of effectivity against four-limbed mammalian vertebrae creatures with two legs and two arms. This was because there were surprisingly enough common grounds between these creatures and human opponents that the adaptive evolution model wasn't entirely obsolete.

However, when the opponent diverged from humans genetically, the adaptive evolution model grew increasingly obsolete. Once the opponents were non-vertebrae or had a different number of limbs, then Rui simply tossed it away, it couldn't even be used at all.

It showed him the scope of the problem in so far as it was related to non-human creatures.

('This won't be easy.') Rui sighed as he glanced back at an animal that had approached him threateningly. At this point, Rui was tired of testing the VOID algorithm against the fauna of the forest.

He used the Mind Mask technique to project a powerful image of himself as he viably could. The Mindmirror secondary brain chugged alongside as it aided with the technique parallel to Rui's mind.

He opened his eyes as a Squire-level aura descended onto the area.

The wolf-like creature whimpered in fear as it turned around and fled for its life, intimidated by the sudden spike in danger that Rui had emanated.

Rui dropped the stealth strategy and went for the intimidation strategy when gathering data with the bio-recon device, mostly because he was stationary and couldn't use the Shadow Step technique when stationary. Mind Mask was powerful but it could not provide him with stealth all by itself.

Instead, using it to fool all the creatures that he was in the Squire Realm was a much more effective strategy. It was attention-drawing, of course, but effective nonetheless. It was a bit dangerous in so far as if he ran into a Martial Artist who approached him despite the Squire-level aura. Which is why he would rather keep a low profile. He wasn't going engage in flashy showing off in the middle of a dangerous mission if he could avoid it.

It took him a few hours, but he finally covered all the points he was required to by protocols.

"Finally done." He huffed before setting back the bio-recon device, before turning to face front. "Now for some more personal investigation into the heart of the matter."

He eagerly began traveling towards the heart of the Serevian Plateau as the explorer within him woke up. He wanted to find out the mystery that lay at the heart of the continent.

Chapter 392: Discoveries

He dashed forward towards the heart of the Serevian Plateau. His Seismic Mapping technique picked up unnaturally high and yet fluctuating seismic radiation incoming from the very direction he was headed at the very moment. He shed his squire-level mind mask before adopting his stealth mind mask and activating the Shadow Step technique, becoming incredibly stealthy and hard to register.

It took him some time but eventually, he reached the heart of the Serevian Plateau.

"What the..." Rui's eyes widened as he beheld the strange sight in front of him. "What in the world is this?"

It was so bizarre he couldn't even put it into words.

In front of him was an elevated landmass. The landmass extended beyond what the eye could see on both sides. It was as though a piece of the tectonic plate had been elevated by dozens of meters, randomly. It was as though the landmass had been transported over and dropped onto the center of the Serevian Plateau.

"What the fuck is this?" He wondered aloud. "How can such a ridiculous elevation even occur naturally?"

He was no geologist, but he racked his brains, both of them, searching for an answer.

"Earthquake?" He quickly wondered.

Earthquakes were caused due to shifts of tectonic plates bordering each other. The shift led to the release of a massive wave of seismic radiation. On the surface, this seemed to be a logical explanation for why the land was elevated and what the cause for the seismic radiation he was sensing was.

"No, that makes no fucking sense." He shook his head.

The seismic radiation released by earthquakes was non-uniform and constant over long periods of time. They were destructive, but acute and didn't last too long. They certainly didn't last four days without ever once reducing in intensity.

"Furthermore, if it was an earthquake, I refuse to believe that the Ministry of Environment and Ecology is incompetent enough to not recognize an earthquake when they see it." He shook his head. "That's not the only problem with that option either. This place is too clean to be the epicenter of an Earthquake."

Earthquakes were destructive. It was absolutely impossible for the structures atop and around the epicenter to be intact. Yet the surroundings were remarkably unkempt. Although a few trees at the very edge had been uprooted due to the split, the surrounding trees were untouched. Even the nests of birds atop the trees had not fallen off.

"Then what else could it be?" Rui wondered as he turned back to face the elevated landmass.

He began investigating it deeply with Seismic Mapping. The results were illuminating.

His eyes widened in shock as a realization hit him. "The roots... The roots of the trees atop that part of the land have grown so much that they have elevated the landmass above its normal level!"

He could clearly sense that the roots were enormously thick, thicker than those of the other trees around him, and had extended far deeper than even his Seismic Mapping could follow!

Because these roots took up so much space underground, that landmass itself shifted up due to an increasing lack of space!

"What the fuck kind of trees and roots are those?" He wondered as he used Seismic Mapping to investigate the structure of the elevated landmass. Due to being displaced in such a manner, a lot of cracks, breaks, and collapses occurred within its structure. This resulted in the creation of many natural caves throughout the landmass. These caves wound about the internal structure of the elevated section of the landmass, interconnecting with each other and the surface of the landmass as well, forming a vast underground cave network.

He also sensed a vast amount of fauna within.

"What's the surface look like? What species are those trees?" He wondered curiously. He leaped, launching himself to an extremely high height with the combination of Flame Breathing, and Outer Convergence. He used Tempestuous Ripple to propel him forward by firing it backward.

STEP

He landed on the surface of the elevated landmass, and his eyes widened, startled, once more.

"What...?" He squinted, rubbing his eyes before looking back up.

He shook his head. "No no. This isn't really possible..."

He took some more measures before he finally gave and accepted his vision wasn't faulty.

Before him, was a vast sea of trees.

Except they weren't.

'They' were a single tree!

All of the tree trunks rooted into the ground that looked like they were separate, were actually all part of the same tree! Their branches were all connected!

Rui gasped as he walked deeper and deeper. Every single 'tree' was connected by a branch. The branches were covered in leaves. The sheer number of branches meant that the leaves covered the entirety of the elevated landmass, forming some resembling a canopy.

Suddenly, Primordial Instinct sensed danger behind him.

WHOOSH

He somersaulted he evaded an attack.

('A tree branch?') His eyes widened as a terrifying thought entered his mind. ('Is this entire tree a carnivorous species?')

WHOOSH WHOOSH WHOOSH

He evaded a few branch attacks as he moved forward. He glanced around curiously as he stumbled across something quite interesting.

"Fruit?" He glanced at the strange exotic glowing round objects hanging from branches.

They glowed and vibrated. Rui instinctively felt with Primordial Instinct that these were no ordinary fruits, they were extremely powerful and energetic.

He reached for one when he sensed something to his right. He turned, coming face to face with an Apprentice-level monkey-like creature hanging on the trees.

"AAahh!" The monkey chattered.

Yet, the meaning it wished to convey magically entered his mind.

[Don't touch those. Those are mine.]

The Fauna Flow technique allowed him to understand the meaning the monkey was trying to convey to him.

Rui snorted. It was merely a high-grade monkey. Rui narrowed his eyes as he activated the Squire-level Mind Mask to scare the monkey off. Yet the very instant he did, he felt a terrifying fear himself through the Primordial instinct technique.

DRIP DRIP

Sharp pain spiked through his body.

"Huh?" Rui glanced down, as his eyes widened.

A branch had attacked and impaled him from the back.

Chapter 393: Realization

DRIP DRIP DRIP

Blood started spurting out of his guts as the branches extricated themselves from his body. He coughed blood as fell to the ground. The shock had initially left him frozen, but he immediately activated Final Breathing which immediately accelerated the clotting process, slowing down the profuse bleeding. He weakly reached for his pouch, pulling out a healing potion.

He gasped as the healing potion diffused into his lungs in gas form and dissolved into his blood, aided by the Final Breathing technique. It quickly reached his wounds, healing them at a remarkable pace.

He gasped in relief as the pain disappeared along with the wound, before getting up abruptly stressing Primordial Instinct to the absolute limit on his immediate surroundings. He eyed the branch with his blood on it.

('What the fuck was that?') He narrowed his eyes.

A branch of the tree randomly attacked him and then went back without doing anything else? At the very least, if it was a carnivorous plant that attacked him in order to consume him, that would make more sense. But why attack him without doing anything else other than injuring him?

Rui immediately dashed out of the forest at a high speed, leaping off of the elevated landmass and landing back in the ordinary forest. The branch that attacked him wasn't visibly different from any of the other branches in the forest, it was just the closest.

Yet it landed an extremely fast and potent attack that allowed it wound him critically. If he didn't have Final Breathing or the healing potion, he would have died on the spot. The fact that it wasn't visibly different from the other branches likely meant that it simply wasn't. This led to the scary conclusion that every branch in the forest was likely capable of the same feat.

"If that's the case, that makes the forest, or the tree itself, extremely dangerous." He noted.

He had no doubt by now that the forest-tree was probably responsible for the environmental and ecological anomalies of the Serevian Plateau. But he wasn't satisfied with just that.

"Why did it attack me?" Rui wondered. "If it was going to attack me, why didn't attack me the second I entered the forest?"

If it was a carnivore tree species, then would it really need to wait that long to attack him?

"It's not impossible, but what are the other possibilities?" He pondered.

It could be that his initial presumption of the branch that attacked him was no different from any other was wrong. Perhaps there were certain parts of the tree that were capable of attacking and hunting prey to consume them.

"But that still runs into the problem of it leaving me after attacking me."

That seemed to indicate that it likely wasn't trying to consume him. Then there was likely another reason why the tree attacked him in the first place.

"It attacked me after I saw the monkey." He recalled as realization dawned upon him. "It attacked me the instant I used the Mind Mask technique."

If that was the trigger, then there was a logical explanation as to why the tree reacted so adversely to him.

"The mind mask I had used back then was the Squire-level mind mask. If that was the trigger then I likely triggered its sense of danger." Rui realized.

Fortunately, there was a way to verify it. He could do it again, except this time under less dangerous circumstances.

He stood at a good distance away from the branches of the tree on the elevated landmass, before taking a deep breath and heightening his alertness and Primordial instinct with the help of the Mindirror secondary brain.

('Here goes nothing.') Rui inhaled deeply.

He activated the Mind Mask technique as a Squire-level aura descended upon the surroundings.

RUMBLE

The very ground, both the plateau and the elevated landmass, shook violently.

Rui's eyes widened in excitement and fear as waves of branches lashed out from atop elevated landmass, stretching unnaturally as they attacked him at a frightening speed.

Yet this time, he was prepared.

WHOOSH

WHOOSH

WHOOSH

Rui weaved away from the attacks as he began retreating at a swift pace. The branches kept following him down at a rapid pace unperturbed. Rui was surprised at the ridiculous amount of range these branches had. They continued following him despite him moving further and further away from the elevated landmass.

The branches weren't originally that long, which meant they were likely being extended further by the tree.

('Which means the wood mass of the tree is not fixed and can be shifted and moved.')

WHOOSH

BAM!

The branches crashed into the ground where Rui was just a moment prior. The leaves and stems got shredded in the process, yet the branch continued attacking him unperturbed.

('This defense mechanism, if that is what it is, is quite self-destructive.') Rui noted. These branches were doing more damage to themselves than they were going so to him.

He continued evading them, getting better and better at it as time went by. He had already begun forming predictive models for the branch attacks with each passing move. The tree quite likely lacked consciousness for its movements were as static and unchanging as a robot. It took Rui just a brief period of time to develop predictive models for all of them.

Suddenly the branches froze as Rui retreated once more.

"Hm? Not coming?" He tilted his head in confusion. The branches simply froze in front of him.

However, when he shifted to the right, they shifted to the right. The same was true regardless of what direction he moved in.

"Ah, range limits perhaps?"

He released the Mind Mask technique as the danger he plummeted from the Squire Realm. The branches swiftly retreated. He stepped forward a few meters before reactivating the technique. The branches immediately returned, lashing out against him.

WHOOSH

He stepped out of their range once more, before releasing the technique and watching those branches retreat once more.

Chapter 394: Documentation

"Alright then." Rui stroked his chin. "Time to summarize everything I've learned thus far."

He quickly parsed through all the facts in his Mind Palace, arranging them neatly.

The core of the Serevian Plateau was an elevated landmass that had been displaced due to the vast number of roots that began consuming more space under the ground due to their expansion, in all likelihood. This caused the landmass to elevate above ground level. It was also the source of the abnormal seismic radiation and certainly the source of other anomalies like migration patterns and other environmental parameters.

The elevated landmass had a high population density upon its surface and inside the vast underground tunnel network beneath the ground. Rui suspected the shift of a large number of animals into the elevated landmass was likely what caused the changes in the migration patterns. He was sure there was a logical explanation and mechanism demonstrating how the elevated landmass affected the Serevian Plateau in different ways.

The flora atop the elevated landmass was all part of a single organism, a single tree that somehow had countless trunks all connected by different branches that all embedded roots so deep into the land that even Seismic Mapping lost track of them beneath the ground.

The tree gave off glowing fruits of different colors, each of which made his Primordial Instinct feel quite uneasy.

The tree also had a defense-mechanism system seemingly. It would attack creatures with a sense of danger in the Squire Realm with branches relentlessly and even self-destructively. Its range was quite high, most likely due to shifting off wood to facilitate its extension.

Rui nodded after organizing all the facts in his head, opening his eyes. He immediately began traveling towards the elevated landmass. He wasn't done with his reconnaissance just yet. Admittedly, he was more curious than he was motivated for completing the mission. How could he not be? Earth simply lacked such fascinating phenomena.

He got back onto the elevated landmass without the Squire-level Mind Mask. As expected, there was no reaction. He navigated back to where was last time.

"Hm?" Rui's eyes narrowed in surprise.

The monkey he had seen then was dead, on the ground. A bitten fruit lay a few steps away from its corpse.

What was even more shocking was that roots had risen from the ground, pulling the corpse deeper into the ground bit by bit.

Rui's eyes widened as he realized what was happening before him.

"The fruit is poisonous!" He exclaimed with shock. The monkey likely had died after consuming a single bite of the fruit.

Furthermore, the roots were clearly going to consume the ground beneath the ground. The tree was a carnivore after all.

"It doesn't fail to surprise," Rui murmured as he updated his Mind Palace with the new facts regarding the tree.

"Now I need to record all these facts and send them back to the Martial Union and the Ministry of Environment and Ecology without any further delay." Rui nodded.

He quickly returned, jumping off the elevated landmass. He ran some distance away before climbing tall trees and rock structures that allowed him to capture images of the elevated landmass with the bio-recon device that he had been provided by the Martial union and the Ministry of Environment and Ecology.

Still, he wasn't able to get a good image encompassing the entire landmass. Mostly because it was as wide as a small city and he couldn't fit it all within the frame. Regardless, he took images of the landmass from various angles around it.

He also documented images that demonstrated that all the flora atop the elevated landmass was all part of a single organism. He couldn't really demonstrate that the roots were causing the elevation in the landmass because he couldn't share his Seismic Mapping with others, but he was sure that just reporting his findings that he had gotten through the technique would be enough.

He also documented the effect the squire-level Mind Mask had on the tree. Showing its reaction to the activation and deactivation of the Mind Mask technique, demonstrating causality between the two events. He also demonstrated the astounding range of the branches of the tree.

He finally ended the report by demonstrating the poisonous nature of the fruit and the corpse of the monkey that was already almost entirely dragged underground by the roots at that point.

"Alright, that's done." He hit the send button, sending all the data he had collected to the Martial Union and the Ministry of Environment and Ecology.

"Now time to wait for the orders." Rui shrugged. He had mostly completed his job, which was to gather information on the environmental and ecological anomalies in the Serevian Plateau. Now he just had to sit tight.

"Well, I can explore the elevated landmass a bit more." Rui shrugged. It wasn't like he had anything to do, and it wasn't like it would hurt the mission.

He leaped up back to the top of the elevated landmass before traveling deeper into it. On his way there, he ran into many creatures that had consumed a portion of the fruits and had died, resulting in roots emerging from the ground and dragging the corpses down slowly.

('Woah, there's another one.') Rui watched a monkey bite into the fruit.

In just a moment, it collapsed to the ground, spasming as it tried to crawl away, yet it was paralyzed. Slowly, its breathing and heartbeat slowed down until it finally passed away. Not even a second later, roots slowly emerged from the ground as they latched onto the corpse.

"The roots didn't emerge until the very moment the monkey had died," Rui noted keenly. "Either that's coincidence or the tree is able to sense the difference between a living and a dead creature, and only goes after the former with its roots. Could it be that all of this is so that it can poison animals and consume their corpses?" Rui wondered curiously.

Chapter 395: Summon

Rui knew that there was a reason why all of this had occurred, but he simply wasn't qualified to figure it out. Thankfully, it wasn't his job to figure it out either. That was something best left to the Ministry of Environment and Ecology. He only needed to do his job.

He chose to travel deeper into the elevated landmass. The deeper he traveled the greater the density of fruits. And the greater the density of corpses that had been poisoned after consuming it and died. Each and every single one of the corpses was being slowly pulled underground by the roots. Rui could believe that these corpses were the reason the tree had grown in this strange fashion. Such was the sheer count of the corpses that lay on the ground.

Furthermore, the deeper he got, the taller the tree trunks were, elevating in height as he continued traveling.

It took a while, but Rui soon reached the core of the elevated landmass.

"Woahhh..."

Before him lay a gigantic tree trunk that dwarfed all other tree trunks.

"Is this the main tree trunk of this large tree?" Rui wondered. It certainly seemed to be the case. The tree trunk was tall and wide and had many large branches branching off from it. Each of the branches from the main tree had secondary tree trunks attached to them. Those secondary tree trunks had even more branches that had even more tree trunks attached to them.

"Could it be that each of these tree trunks is actually branches that simply extended downwards before reaching the ground and taking root?" Rui wondered.

In that case, it was more accurate to call all the tree trunks in the forest tree branches.

Just as he was about to ponder more, he got a beep on his mission tracker device, indicating a message from the Martial Union.

Rui frowned as he read the message. "An urgent summon back to the headquarters?"

Rui tilted his head in confusion. Why was he being urgently summoned home?

He didn't know for sure but...

"It has something to do with this tree, doesn't it?" Rui glanced back at the main trunk suspiciously, before setting off back in the direction he had come from. He couldn't afford to waste any time at all.

He immediately began running back at a high pace, using all his maneuvering techniques to nearly their limit.

('Could it be that the tree is actually extremely dangerous to human civilization and I just discovered a big threat?') A random thought entered his head before his logic and reason quashed the idea.

('No, there's no way that tree is a threat.') Rui shook his head. ('If I can avoid its attacks then that means that Martial Squires can handle it with ease.')

If it was a threat that Martial Squires could handle, then there was no way it was a threat in the grand scheme of things.

('Though that may not entirely be true. The earthen basilisk could get crushed by any Martial Squire, but they were still viewed as a threat by the Ministry of Environment and Ecology.') Rui recalled. This was because the earthen basilisks were very difficult to exterminate and were capable of wreaking havoc across human settlements.

('If it's not because of a threat pertaining to the tree, then it probably has something to do with opportunity.') Rui's eyes lit up in interest. If the urgency was not negative then it was likely positive, which meant that there was something that could be gained and Rui could help with it in all likelihood.

He didn't know which one was the case. Of course, there was the possibility that the urgent summons had nothing to do with his mission and some other emergency had occurred that required all hands on deck.

He would find out regardless.

Five hours later, he had arrived at the headquarters of the Martial Union, panting heavily. He quickly consumed a physical rejuvenation potion before entering the Martial Union, after showing his license to the security.

"Excuse me." Rui addressed a staff member. "I received an urgent summon from the Martial Union. Can you please tell me what to do?"

"Ah give me a moment." She fiddled with her terminal. "Office number two hundred and thirty-seven."

"Thank you," Rui replied before turning around and navigating his way to the designated room.

KNOCK KNOCK

"Come in." A male voice instructed him.

"Excuse me." Rui entered. "I was told to come to this office regarding my urgent summon back from my mission."

"Indeed." The man nodded. "Have a seat."

He gave off the air of an intellectual with authority, with a well-groomed attire and a confident demeanor. "I am Zhrekes Shrul." He introduced himself. "I'm an office from the Ministry of Environment and Ecology."

He showed Rui a badge before continuing. "I require an immediate report from you regarding every moment of your stay at the Serevian Plateau. You must include every single detail without fail."

"That's not a problem, of course." Rui nodded. "I was hoping I could be informed as to why I was urgently summoned in the middle of my mission."

"Your mission is over, Apprentice Quarrier." He told him. "Nonetheless, you will be informed."

Rui waited for him to continue.

"The target of your mission that you were required to identify as the cause for the environmental and ecological anomalies that occurred in the Serevian Plateau is not ordinary." He stated. "It is a rare, yet well-known and well-documented phenomenon that occurs in the Beast Domain. You're not the first to find it and you won't be the last. It is a source of great opportunity, yet we won't be the only ones in pursuit of it. There will be great competition from our rivals."

"Uh..." Rui's eyebrows knitted in confusion. "I'm afraid I have no idea what any of that is supposed to mean, unfortunately."

Officer Zhrekes chuckled a bit before nodding. "Don't worry, I'll explain all of it right away."

Chapter 396: Explanation

"The data you brought back was most interesting. We identified what we were dealing with in a moment before urgently summoning you back." Officer Zhrekes explained. "The tree responsible for the anomalies is actually not of a species that normally engages in such biological developments."

"What?" Rui frowned. "The species of the tree doesn't grow and develop this way?"

Officer Zherkes nodded. "Correct."

"Then... Are there some specific circumstances under which the tree develops and grows this way?" Rui asked.

This was the first possibility that came to mind. However, he had no idea what circumstances those were.

"Also correct." Officer Zherkes nodded. "In fact, this species isn't the only species that engages in such growth and development. There are many species that engage in similar growth developments under a specific set of circumstances."

"What are these circumstances?" Rui asked curiously.

"Many tree species in the Beast Domain have a high root development capacity." He continued. "Their roots have the capability to grow to an extremely deep depth. The net root volume ends up providing an immense amount of sustenance to the tree in question. However, every once in a while, these roots run into something more than just ordinary soil, water, and nutrients."

"They run into high-energy esoteric ores." He continued. "Most species do not possess roots powerful enough to drain the esoteric ores and turn them into sustenance for accelerated growths. But what if a species that was capable of absorbing high-energy esoteric ores and compounds?"

Rui's eyes lit up with interest and curiosity. These circumstances had not even entered his mind when he thought about it himself. Largely because this required an understanding of the geology of Gaia, something he was sorely lacking. But he could see the direction his explanation was going down.

"If there was such a species... Then it would likely gain access to a large amount of energy?" Rui scratched his head. His understanding of esoteric matter and other esoteric resources was very shallow. He could not possibly provide a well-thought explanation.

"Correct." Agent Zhrekes nodded before continuing. "And what happens when the tree gains access to extreme energy sources that it can viably provide energy to? What happens is that the tree is able to grow and develop to a much greater degree than it normally can under normal circumstances. The excess energy is channeled into the expansion of the tree. However, that expansion does not occur in the vertical elevation of the tree, it occurs in the lateral expansion of the tree."

"Wow," Rui remarked. "Is that why the tree was that ridiculously wide in regards to the area it covered?"

"Correct." Agent Zherkes nodded. "The branches reach down to the ground and burrow into the soil before sprouting even more roots that will dig deeper towards the esoteric ore reservoirs to siphon more of the high-energy matter. Based on the data you have provided, it's quite clear that the tree that was the target of your mission has run into a rather large reservoir of esoteric compounds, considering that it has expanded into the size of a town."

"I see..." Rui digested the information officer Zherkes provided him.

"The reactive defense mechanism of the branches is also not uncommon. The tree does not allow lifeforms that are too dangerous to it to approach it. Which is why it attacked you when you displayed a Squire-level aura with the Mind Mask technique. Only Martial Apprentices that are, of course, below the Squire Realm are able to enter the forest unobstructed." Officer Zherkes mentioned.

"And the opportunity you mentioned earlier..." Rui continued. "You're referring to the esoteric ore reserves beneath the ground?"

"In part." Officer Zherkes nodded. "However, the tree itself is valuable. The fruits that you remarked on are actually biological products with processed and purified esoteric matter within them, hence their strange traits, including their high toxicity. The tree allows creatures weak enough to be a threat to itself to be lured in by the fruit's allure so that they consume it, only to die and be absorbed by the tree."

"The fruits are valuable themselves, then?" Rui asked.

"Quite." Officer Zherkes nodded. "They process ores in ways that we often do not understand nor can replicate. They're often used in the purification and processing of the ores."

"So all we need to do is swoop in and take the fruits and mind the esoteric ores?" Rui asked.

If that was the case, he could certainly understand the Martial Union's and the ministry's interest in the tree. But what was the urgency?

"Ideally, it would be as simple as that." Agent Zherkes nodded. "But alas, reality is rarely that ideal. Do you know the geography of the Serevian Plateau and its placement in human civilization? Specifically, the nations closest to it?"

Rui nodded. "The immediate surroundings are those of small human settlements and states. Further away lie the super-nations such as the Kandrian Empire, the Republic of Gorteau, and the Sekigahara Confederation."

Rui's eyes widened as he understood. "We can't claim the esoteric reservoirs and the trees easily, can we?"

"Not at all." He shook his head. "The super nations will have realized the significance of the anomalies of the Serevian Plateau sooner or later. Once that happens..."

He locked eyes with Rui. "It's war. A mine of valuable esoteric ores the size of a large town is not something that the super nations can or are willing to afford to just give away to their competitors for free, especially when they are all equally distanced from the Serevian plateau, roughly speaking."

Rui gulped. "So that's why I was urgently summoned back... My information is highly valuable in a way that will involve the Martial Artists of higher Realms even..."

"No." Agent Zherkes shook his head. "That is unlikely to happen. The war will actually be restricted to the Apprentice Realm, in all likelihood."

"What?" Rui's eyes scrunched up in confusion. "What do you mean by that? Why would such an important conflict be restricted to the Apprentice Realm?"

Chapter 397: Elaboration

"Because of practical reasons." Officer Zherkes told him. "As you know, the tree attacks Martial Artists at or above the Squire Realm."

"But surely those attacks mean nothing to Martial Squires." He insisted. "I know they don't. I was able to avoid them when alert. Those attacks are nothing to a Martial Squire."

"They may be nothing to a Martial Squire, but they're everything to the tree itself." Officer Zherkes replied. "Martial Squires would be able to crush the attacks that the tree launches, but the reactive defense mechanism of trees that undergo banyanification, the broad colloquial term of the expansive growth process, is too self-destructive. Although Martial Squires would come out unharmed, the tree itself would not. The fruits would all be crushed and destroyed rendering them extremely difficult to process into potions, if not impossible. The fruits are just as valuable as the actual ore itself, if not more due to their pure constitution. Therefore, generally, nations do not dispatch Martial Artists at or above the level of power that would result in the triggering of the reactive defense mechanism."

"'Generally'?" Rui asked, catching the implication of the word. "This has happened enough times before for there to be a trend?"

"Indeed." Officer Zherkes nodded. "There is an unspoken, and sometimes even spoken and written agreement between relevant human nations to restrict the conflict to the necessary Realms, so that the conflict would not result in a waste of resources. Nations would rather get their hands on such processed bio-resources that are much easier to employ in technological solutions, rather than come back home empty-handed."

"I see..." Rui murmured. "So in this case..."

"That's right." Officer Zherkes replied immediately. "In this case, it is quite likely that Martial Apprentices like yourself will engage in the dungeon wars."

"'Dungeon Wars'?" Rui frowned.

"That's what they're referred to colloquially." Officer Zherkes chuckled. "Because there is a three-dimensional environment including the underground cave network, the surface and the branch networks that are more or less closed off, the environment of the banyanified forest are called dungeons."

"I see..." Rui muttered. "This has happened more than a few times, I'm guessing."

"Much more yes." Officer Zherkes nodded. "So much so that there are official protocols and systems in place designed to address the emergence of a banyanified forest. One of those protocols is urgently summoning the Martial Artist or individual in question who discovered the banyanified tree and extracting a report from them." Officer Zherkes explained. "That is why you and I are both here. Now then, time is of the essence. Please provide a detailed report of your mission. Do not dismiss any piece of information as insignificant or unnecessary, is that clear?"

Rui nodded. "Understood."

Rui set aside his curiosity and interest and began typing on a typewriter that officer Zherkes had provided him. Because of the detail that he needed to go into. It had taken him quite a while to write the report.

"Done." Rui huffed after he finally finished. "Here you go."

Zherkes looked up, having been reading the finished pages of the report. "Good job Apprentice Quarrier. Your completion of the mission was nearly flawless and you have accelerated a process that would have otherwise taken much longer than usual, giving us a crucial time advantage. Now then, do you have any questions before I leave?"

"Yes." Rui nodded. "How would the other nations even find out about this?"

"The other nations aren't incompetent." Officer Zherkes snorted. "Nations have various information networks that would allow them to learn of it given enough time. Furthermore, the seismic radiation projected by the tree when it attacked you is not insignificant and will have no doubt earned the scrutiny of the nations that aren't too far away from the Serevian Plateau."

Rui nodded, having figured that out by himself, he just wanted to verify that he had the right idea on the issue. "So, if only Martial Apprentices will be involved in the conflict to monopolize the banyanified tree, can I expect a mission soon?"

"The Martial Union will certainly take some effort into commissioning its Martial Artists into participating..." Officer Zherkes nodded. "As for what measures, I can't say."

He turned back to Rui. "Though it is almost assured that you will be incorporated into the war effort."

"Oh?" Rui raised an eye. "Why is that?"

Officer Zherkes snorted. "Playing modest, are we? You're a grade-ten Martial Apprentice with a skillset highly useful in dungeons. That alone is more than enough. Now then, I must get going, pleasure meeting you, Apprentice Quarrier."

Rui fell into thought after he bid officer Zherkes goodbye, as he walked back home.

A conflict between Martial Artists over the monopoly of esoteric resources.

He grinned, excited. Just when he was getting a little bored, he gets presented with a brilliant opportunity to participate in a conflict much bigger than himself.

Just how many Martial Artists would be participating? How many of the elite Martial Artists of the geographic surroundings would he be fighting against?

"The sheer number of highly elite Martial Artists even among the tenth grade will be staggering!" Rui exclaimed, excited.

The proportion of Martial Apprentices in the tenth grade was a very minute proportion of the Martial Apprentice population. There were extremely few Martial Apprentices in the Kandrian Empire that could truly give Rui a run for his money.

However, that was only when the conversation was limited to a single nation.

When many nations were involved, the sheer number of even pinnacle Martial Apprentices was not low!

"This is a god-sent opportunity," Rui remarked.

It was very difficult for him to find a perfectly equal opponent. Although Martial Squires could restrict themselves, it wasn't the same. They could only hold back so much. It was physically impossible for them to slow down their mental processing and reflexes as well as the toughness of their constitution. While it was challenging, it was not perfect.

But with this, he would truly be able to fight against Martial Apprentices who were genuinely his equal, perhaps even greater!

Chapter 398: Await

A few days passed, and Rui refused to take any missions out of fear that he would be missing out on whenever the Kandrian Empire decided to take action in whatever it decided to handle the matter of the dungeon war.

Frankly, Rui wasn't sure how things would pan out. Would the Martial Union be involved alone? Would the Kandrian Government or the Royal Family be involved or take control? He didn't know. He couldn't be sure about how the two hegemons of the Kandrian Empire would act.

His understanding of politics was still very vague and broad. He didn't understand the nuances that were involved in such matters that would ultimately decide the manner in which the Kandrian Empire would participate in the dungeon wars. It wasn't just a matter of intelligence or smartness; he just wasn't informed enough on international dynamics and foreign policy or the domestic decision-making protocols that the Martial Union and the Kandrian government engaged in when they processed the matter.

Eventually, an announcement was made. However, it wasn't the one Rui was waiting for or anticipating.

"A change in the Martial Apprentice grading system?" Rui frowned. "Really? At this time? But why? Wasn't it working just fine? What caused this change?"

He hadn't yet realized that he was the leading trigger to the updation of the existing ten-point grading system of Martial prowess evaluation.

Thankfully, the announcement that he had gotten both through his accouter and through a letter explained the reasons behind the change.

Each generation of Martial Artists was stronger than the previous generation of Martial Artists. This was due to higher-quality techniques and higher-quality growth and training resources that younger and newer generations had access to. Several of the techniques and training and growth resources that Rui had used over the years were actually recently developed products that the previous generation never had access to.

Over time, those differences accumulated too much such that the strongest of Martial Apprentices exceeded the limits of the ten-point grading system set by the Martial Union. At such times, the Martial union would scale most Martial Apprentices down by one point while the strongest of Martial Apprentices would become the new peak.

The message informed him that his new grade would remain the same as his old grade.

"Hm. Odd." He shrugged, tossing the letter away. It changed nothing for him, so it didn't matter all that much.

However, he could not help but wonder if this had something to do with the upcoming dungeon wars that had been forecasted for him. Were they readjusting the Martial Apprentice grading system in order to ensure only the most qualified Martial Artists participated in the war?

Rui strongly suspected that was close to the truth. He had contacted his friends via his accouter, asking them about their grading points.

"I remained at grade nine," Kane confirmed. "But Hever, Fae, and Nel fell to grade eight. Dalen fell to grade seven, while Milliana fell to grade six."

"I see... That's a shame for them." Rui admitted. "Good on you for staying at grade nine. You must be really strong right now, on the verge of reaching the previous grade ten, probably."

"Been working hard. Can't remain in the Academy forever." Kane replied.

They chatted a bit more before hanging up.

"I wonder at what grade Fiona and Ian are at." Rui wondered. They were also two of the strongest Martial Artists of his generation. He was curious as to what level they currently were at. It had been more than a year since the Martial Contest had ended, after all.

Particularly, he was curious about Fiona, she had an incredible rate of mastery that probably surpassed even his, now that his own rate of mastery had reduced significantly.

"I'll probably meet them for the dungeon wars then." He realized. If they were powerful enough, and they almost certainly were, he absolutely would run into them when the Martial Union and the Kandrian government came to a conclusion as to how to proceed with the dungeon conflict.

"Why are you so restless?" Julian asked with a suspicious look in his eye.

"I'm not restless," Rui replied blankly.

"You've been oscillating back and forth on the sofa for the past few days instead of going out there and completing some missions or training a new technique like you normally would. You constantly look at your accouter with eagerness, as if you're expecting something, likely an announcement of some sort." Julian told him. "Am I wrong?"

"Tsk." Rui tutted. "Alright, you got me."

"What is it that you are waiting so impatiently?" Julian asked, curiously.

"I received word of a conflict involving a large number of nations that will likely be limited to the Apprentice Realm," Rui told him, without revealing anything specific. "It's the perfect opportunity for me to test my prowess against the most powerful of Martial Apprentices across a tiny chunk of the Panama Continent!"

Julian's eyes widened at his words. "Are you absolutely certain of that? If that is the case, that's huge news!"

"Very sure." Rui nodded. "I'm just waiting for it because I don't want to be away on a mission when the announcement comes. If the announcement doesn't come within a week, then I'm going to take low-grade quick missions that can be finished in no time until it does come!"

"Are you sure you want to participate?" Julian asked with a worried expression. "It sounds extremely dangerous. You'll be competing against some of the most powerful Martial Apprentices and be risking your life against them."

"I know." Rui nodded. "It's not that I'm being overconfident. But not only is fighting other Martial Artists a core part of being a Martial Artist but also, I do need to become stronger at this point. I need experience against truly powerful Martial Artists in order to make forward progress on the road to Squire."

Julian felt a bit more reassured seeing the determination and confidence. "If that's how you feel, then I can only wish you good luck."

Chapter 399: Negotiations

"Delegates of the many sovereign states you represent, as the delegate of the Kandrian Empire. I thank all of the participating nations for your acceptance of our invitation as well as your willingness to enter negotiation regarding the matter of the Serevian Dungeon."

In a large extravagant hall in the Royal Palace in the town of Vargard was a round table with many figures seated at it. Yet, among all of them, only one was physically present. The remaining figures were projected three-dimensional images projected using esoteric three-dimensional projection technology. Before the only physically present individual, the delegate of the Kandrian Empire was a device that tracked his movements and relayed the information to several locations in different countries that would project a three-dimensional image of the Kandrian delegate.

This was a high-level form of communication that allowed individuals to communicate with each other as though they were present in the same room.

"As all of you are surely aware. The Serevian Plateau has become home to a dungeon at its very core. The purpose of this meeting is to cooperate or come to a compromise on the matter regarding the claims on the Serevian Dungeon and the resources that lay within; the vast amount of Featherblood Mercury and the Nereneal Flintstone detected to be present in the fruits of the Serevian Dungeon." The delegate of the Kandrian Empire continued. "We shall commence the deliberations and negotiations immediately. The first proposal I would like to offer to all the representatives and delegates present is the collective denial of the acknowledgment of any claims to the Serevian Dungeon made by sovereign states more than one sovereign state away from the Serevian Plateau. The Kandrian Empire is firm in the belief that sovereign states separated from the Serevian Plateau by more than a sovereign state do not have any right to stake a claim on the territory occupied by the Serevian Dungeon. All in favor?"

Immediately, all the delegates in the room raised a hand, indicating their agreement with the proposal made by the Kandrian delegate. The proposal effectively prevented sovereign states from very far away from trying to infringe on the Serevian Dungeon. The sovereign nations, the delegates of which were present in the currently ongoing summit hosted by the Kandrian Empire were all those nations who weren't too far away enough to not have a valid claim onto the territory of the Serevian Dungeon.

All of them were more than willing to not acknowledge the claims of even further nations on the Serevian Dungeon as valid. The fewer the sovereign states they had to acknowledge as legitimate contenders for the Serevian Dungeon, the fewer the people they would be forced to share the pie with.

"A unanimous agreement." The delegate of the Kandrian Empire nodded. "With that out of the way, the floor is open to any delegate that wishes to make a proposal or a statement."

Immediately, one of the figures raised two fingers, indicating their desire to speak.

"King Jurrian Fil Nochus." The delegate of the Kandrian Empire acknowledged.

"As the ruler of the Kingdom of Nochus, I would like to declare the Serevian Dungeon as the property of the Kingdom of Nochus. As the nation closest to the Serevian Plateau, to the point that the border of the Kingdom of Nochus overlaps that of the Serevian Plateau at several points. The validity of our claim is the strongest and the only truly valid claim to the Serevian Dungeon. I point to the way claims over neighboring uncolonized lands to states are treated. Uncolonized land is generally treated as belonging to and the responsibility of the closest bordering sovereign state. Following this rationale and international custom, the Serevian Plateau and the Serevian Dungeon belong to the Kingdom of Nochus." he concluded.

Several delegates raised their hands.

"Delegate of the Sekigahara Confederate." The Kandrian delegate nodded at the closest individual to him.

"The Sekigahara Confederate does not acknowledge the validity of King Jurrian Fil Nochus' statement or claim over the Serevian Plateau and Dungeon."

"The Republic of Gortea seconds the Sekigahara Confederate." Another delegate chimed in.

"The Britannian Empire also seconds the Sekigahara Confederate."

One by one, all of the delegates followed suit as they supported the Sekigahara Confederate delegate in the refusal to acknowledge the claim over the Serevian Plateau and Dungeon.

It didn't matter whether King Jurrian had a point or not. No one gave a damn about that. None of them were willing to completely fork over a city-wide mine of featherblood mercury or nereneal flintstone over something like international customs.

"The Kandrian Empire also seconds the Sekigahara Confederate in its stance against King Jurrian's claim over the Serevian Plateau and Dungeon. The Kandrian Empire would further like to point out that the Kingdom of Nochus has neglected the responsibilities that generally come with being internationally recognized as the bona fide owner of Serevian Plateau." The Kandrian delegate added. "Thus, the legitimacy of such a conveniently timed claim over the Serevian Plateau is highly questionable and not acceptable."

The Kandrian delegate turned back to face all the other delegates. "The Kandrian Empire proposes a division of the territory of the Serevian Dungeon among all the sovereign nations present in this summit. This proposal aims to eliminate the waste of Martial Art resources that would undoubtedly ensue in a conflict in the Serevian Dungeon over the Serevian Dungeon itself."

This was a more controversial proposal from the Kandrian Empire. The proposal favored those sovereign nations that were among the smallest and weakest of nations that were doubtful to even be able to successfully seize and keep a portion of the Serevian Dungeon if there was a war over it. On the other hand, it was a proposal that did not necessarily favor the larger and more powerful nations that were present at the summit.

"The Britannian Empire strongly refuses the proposal offered by the Kandrian Empire." the delegate of the Britannian Empire sternly replied. "We are more than capable of seizing what's ours."

Chapter 400: Proposal

The atmosphere grew tense at the heavy-handed declaration of the delegate of the Britannian Empire. It didn't help that the delegate had broken the norms of addressal by referring to the Britannian Empire in first-person rather than third-person when he wasn't the ruler of the kingdom.

Still, none of the other delegates piped up immediately against the rude gesture. The arrogance of the delegate of the Britannian Empire was not all that unfounded. Everybody knew that the Britannian Empire was the most powerful sovereign nation in the summit hosted by the Kandrian Empire. All of them were wary about butting heads with the titan.

"Bold words, delegate." The delegate of the Republic of Gorteau replied. "The Republic of Gorteau also refuses the Kandrian Empire's proposal regarding the division of the territory of the Serevian Plateau."

"The Sekigahara Confederation is willing to participate in the division of territory between the present sovereign states provided that the division of the territory is done so in accordance with economic parameters such as GDP." The delegate of the Sekigahara Confederation.

The Kandrian delegate nodded as he turned back to the delegates of the Republic of Gorteau and the Britannian Empire.

The delegates of the four nations began deliberating with each other as the remaining delegates simply watched along. Most of them were delegates of small sovereign nations with very little negotiation power and had only just barely qualified to have a seat at the summit.

Instead, they simply watched as the four most powerful nations, the Kandrian Empire, the Sekigahara Confederation, the Republic of Gorteau, and the Britannian Empire, duke it out amongst themselves. The best they could really do was secure the best terms and conditions in whatever agreement these four nations chalked up.

"It seems as though we are unable to come to a resolution, regretfully." The Kandrian delegate stated. "If the Britannian Empire and the Republic of Gorteau are unwilling to agree to the division of territory, then allow the Kandrian Empire to make another proposal instead."

The delegates waited in silence.

"Instead of a division of territory, allow the Kandrian Empire to propose an assignment of a minute amount of territory to each of the present nations as a guaranteed territory. The remaining vast majority of the Serevian Plateau and the dungeon is up for free colonization by any of the present sovereign states" The Kandrian delegate concluded.

All of the delegates considered the proposal as they realized the significance of the proposal.

Because of the nature of dungeons, enacting a scorched earth policy was quite easy for any of the present nations, small or large. Because of the self-destructive defense mechanism of the Serevian

Dungeon, all one needed to do was send over several Martial Squires to attack the Serevian Dungeon and the Dungeon would suffer an immense amount of damage quite quickly. The process could be accelerated with Martial Artists of higher Realms that would allow any of the nations present to completely annihilate the Serevian Dungeon.

Of course, no sovereign nation would want the Serevian Dungeon to be annihilated, not when it was as much of a rich resource-high location. The problem was, if some of the nations were bullied out of gaining even a portion of the Serevian Dungeon, then there was a logical incentive to destroy the dungeon for these countries since it would minimize the gains made by the other nations.

The proposal made by the delegate of the Kandrian Empire addressed that issue by providing all the present sovereign nations a minute but core territory that all nations would agree not to infringe upon. This way, none of the other sovereign nations would be pushed to choose to go for the scorched earth policy.

"The Kingdom of Grahal seconds the proposal made by the Kandrian Empire."

"The Commonwealth Duchy of Vinfrana also seconds the proposal made by the Kandrian Empire."

...

One by one each of the delegates recognized the usefulness of the proposal that the Kandrian delegate had made.

"Delegate of the Britannian Empire." The Kandrian delegate turned to face him. "The Britannian Empire the only member in this summit which has yet to convey its stance on the matter."

The delegate of the Britannian Empire remained silent for a few seconds before the mildest of sighs escaped his mouth. "... The Britannian Empire seconds the proposal made by the Kandrian Empire."

The proposal made too much sense, not even the Britannian Empire could guarantee that nations that had been bullied out would not resort to such measures. Even if it could, the measures needed to be in place would be too much. It would require a large number of Martial Artists to remain under

surveillance in the Serevian Plateau such that the number would make the Serevian Dungeon become a liability.

Instead, the proposal of the Kandrian Empire guaranteed, to a certain extent, that no scorched earth policy would be enacted by any of the sovereign nations present.

"Then there is a unanimous agreement." The Kandrian delegate nodded. "Let us begin fleshing out the details of the distribution then."

What followed was an intense debate about how much of the land ought to be guaranteed to the participating states. There was an immense amount of controversy and conflict over this issue. The amount of land assigned couldn't be too much or too little. It had to be just the right amount.

If it was too much, then the smaller and weaker nations would be unfairly advantaged by gaining access to an amount of territory that they normally would not be able to retain. Yet if the amount was too little, then it would not serve as a viable deterrence to prevent any of the present nations from enacting a scorched earth policy, because the gains would be too minute to be enough of an incentive to not destroy the Serevian Plateau.

The nations had to be careful and find the right balance to ensure that nothing went wrong that could lead to the destruction of the Serevian Dungeon.