

Martial Unity 881

Chapter 881: Discovery

Rui didn't immediately head to the dungeon, he had something important to do. He immediately whipped out a letter before writing down some instructions about banning certain third parties from transacting with Esosale Suppliers.

He painstakingly wrote down all the names that he memorized from the document that Commissioner Reze provided, regretting that he didn't ask for a copy. He considered Guildmaster Bradt's perspective on the matter. He knew that the man would definitely have thoughts on the new directive that Rui provided.

There was no way he wouldn't notice that the restricted companies were from the Kandrian Empire. This would instantly tell him that Rui at the very least had something to do with the Kandrian Empire.

He would, of course, immediately consider that Rui was from the Kandrian Empire. He would be foolish not to, this was the one of the possibilities with the greatest probability of being true. Though he would also consider that the Volder had been caught by the Kandrian Empire who, rather than selling him out to the alliance, made a deal with him.

Neither of these was exactly untrue.

Regardless, he would most likely not be pleased with the new directive. Unfortunately, Esosale Suppliers was not his company, it was Rui's, and Rui made sure that he retained full decision-making power over his company during their agreement, he would stop the supply of esoteric resources at any time if Guildmaster Bradt failed to comply.

Furthermore, Rui was not worried about this being bad for business. The demand for the esoteric substance was greater than the supply, and he was not afraid of running out of business by isolating even as many customers and clientele as he was.

"Post this the same way as usual, and then we'll head to the Shionel Dungeon immediately," Rui told Kane, handing him an envelope.

"Sure thing," Kane nodded.

The method by which they delivered letters to Guildmaster Bradt without being detected was simply inserting them into the stockpile of a delivery man about to be dispatched. Although this did involve not paying for the service, Rui prioritized being covert in this instance. He did make anonymous donations to the delivery service separately.

It wasn't long before Kane returned and the two of them quickly prepped up, ready to head to the dungeon.

"Our biggest advantage is that Chairman Deacon is searching radially outwards," Rui mentioned. "This requires more manpower as time goes on since the radius will keep increasing further the further you go out. That makes his life much harder than it does for us due to the way in which he searches."

By the time the two of them reached the inner ring of the Adventurer Ring town, the two of them widened their eyes at the sheer population of Martial Squires coming in and out of the Shionel Dungeon.

It was multiple times the size that it used to be. Rui recalled that it was much sparser and shallower when he first arrived at the Shionel Confederation.

"Let's go,"

The two of them quickly entered the dungeon.

"Alright, which path today?" Kane asked.

"We'll check out a different section of the Shionel Dungeon than before," Rui informed him.

The two of them still had Void Step active since there were simply far too many Martial Squires in the vicinity. He did not want to be spotted by any of them. The sheer number of people on the first floor made him want to avoid it entirely. Though he needed to verify whether Guildmaster Bradt had left any messages for him.

('I should probably give Guildmaster Bradt a new location to bury anything to deliver to me,') Rui sighed as he scanned the entire floor with Riemannian Echo, making sure he didn't miss anything.

He observed a larger amount of infrastructure on the first floor, a lot of facilities, mostly storage while there were some shops run by Martial Squires on behalf of other companies, selling potions and other things of the sort.

('Looks like Guildmaster Bradt has already begun putting the parts of the map I gave him to good use,') Rui noted with interest.

He had always figured that the Shionel Dungeon would be used for its space, by him, even if it was unlikely to ever be turned into a residential area due to the sensory jamming aspects of it, though that too would reduce once all of the accessible esoteric ore deposits were mined and harvested.

From what Rui could see, Guildmaster Bradt would probably intend to turn the entire dungeon into a gigantic inventory or processing space that could be rented out or bought by companies to use. As the sole person who possessed a map, Guildmaster Bradt would dominate as the one and only distribution service in the entire dungeon.

Rui shook his head. Guildmaster Bradt's plans were irrelevant to him. He would long be gone from the nation by the time that time arrived.

Rui and Kane ventured deep into the dungeon encountering fewer and fewer Martial Squires as time passed by. Yet Rui never let his guard down even once. It wasn't the Martial Squires he was afraid of. He was most afraid of whatever apex predator it was that brutalized the Earthen basilisk that the extracted scales.

That was something he did not want to run into. It made him more sensitive to any monster he came across. He did not want to grow too overconfident and go out of his way to fight a monster that turned out to be quasi-Senior level or something.

The two of them carefully traveled the dungeon for quite a long time, exploring new sections of the dungeon that they hadn't explored before until finally, Rui's sense found what they were looking for.

"New floor!" Rui announced triumphantly.

"Nice," Kane nodded. "About damn time. Walking around these tunnels is nauseating. Which direction is it in? What's it like? What kind of monsters are in there?"

"It's definitely weird," Rui frowned as he began walking closer towards it to get a better view of it with Riemannian Echo.

"As for the monsters..." Rui murmured before his eyes widened. "Are these... ants?!"

Chapter 882: Fascinated

"Ants?" Kane raised an eyebrow. "Like, normal small ants? The type that are pretty easy to kill hopefully?"

"I'm afraid to disappoint you, but... these seem pretty non-standard," Rui murmured. "Come on, I found a pathway to it. We don't need to break through a bunch of tunnels this time."

The two of them quickly moved and followed a particular tunnel path that Rui guided him through before they eventually ran into an open wide space, yet it wasn't entirely unoccupied.

"Woah," Kane did a double take. "Is that... an anthill?!"

Even he could perceive the gigantic structure.

"It's an ant mountain, actually," Rui murmured as he sized up the gigantic structure. "It wouldn't be the first time a floor has contained a mountain-sized structure."

He recalled the sixteenth floor with the tree.

"So how many ants are there in the colony?" Kane gulped.

"Tens of thousands," Rui murmured. "On the low side as far as ant colonies go."

Rui could feel the various ants trickling in and out of the holes in the ant mountain, he could roughly gauge their number as he swept through them counting them in groups.

"You're telling me we have to deal with tens of thousands of Squire-level monsters?" Kane raised an eyebrow. "We're not Martial Seniors, just in case you weren't aware."

"Relax Kane," Rui replied, smirking. "We don't need to be Martial Seniors to take on Squire-level monsters. Monsters are not equivalent to Martial Artists. Otherwise, we would be completely doomed since monsters outnumber Martial Artists immensely. Martial Art techniques are what make the battle fair. Monsters do not possess techniques, and they cannot leverage our physicality the way we do ours."

Martial Art techniques were essentially trained routines that allowed for hyper-efficient and effective applications of energy and power to produce superhuman results. This was why even as a Martial Apprentice whose body was identical to a human, aside from the brain, he could perform feats such as shattering rocks.

"So even if these ants possess the equivalent of a grade-five body, they're basically as strong as a grade-two Martial Squire," Rui explained. "On top of that, they're usually stupid as hell, and so when you include our strategic and tactical prowess, it's even more overwhelming."

"Still, that's not always necessarily true, look at the Shionel taipans, a single bite from them is ending you even if they are much weaker," Kane pointed out.

"That's true," Rui nodded. "It is a nuanced matter, still, I'm pointing out a general trend. Regardless, I think we'll be fine."

It was why Rui was more afraid of the predator that hunted the Earthen Basilisk, which he evaluated to be on par with grade-ten Martial Squires due to its vastly greater physique. That was a monster he did not want to fight it.

In comparison, despite their numbers, he didn't feel much threat from the ants.

('Part of it also has to do with how easy they are to predict,')

Rui felt like he could predict them even without building a predictive model around the ants. Their movements and courses of action were so rigid, that he didn't even need to employ his Martial Art to understand what they were going to do.

Instead of even building predictive models, he was more interested in understanding how the colony worked.

"Ants generally have a sophisticated system," Rui murmured. "I wonder if that's true for them even when they're monsterified."

"I couldn't care less about the science lessons," Kane scoffed. "Where is the bounty at?"

"They're deep within the ant mountain," Rui threw disapproving look at Kane's materialism. "We'll get them alright, but I am curious as to what's going on here. They don't ever leave the dungeon considering we haven't run into one before, nor have there been any reports of ant monsters before."

Rui curiously observed what the ants were doing.

A good portion of the ants was on the ant mountain, working on the walls, seemingly gathering dirt from the floor while piling it on the walls with some adhesive-like substance from their mouth.

Another proportion of ants was gathering esoteric ore deposits from the rest of the floor.

This was what Rui found to be the most interesting. The ants were able to detect and mineral and organic ore deposits, before proceeding to extract them.

Then they would scurry into the ant mountain deep into a complex array of tunnels, heading into the innermost compartment of the mountain.

Rui's eyes widened as he laid discovered a giant room at the center of the mountain with an especially giant and more developed ant.

"Is that... the queen ant?!" Rui's eyes lit up in interest. "So the ants are gathering esoteric ore deposits instead of normal food? That's an interesting development."

He wondered if perhaps the monsterification was what led to this change.

"Maybe they evolved to be that way," Rui wondered.

He could imagine multiple strains of ants undergoing different kinds of monsterification, only the queen ants that developed an innate hunger to consume esoteric ore deposits would produce offspring that inherited that genetic proclivity, while the ones that sought food instead of esoteric ore deposits would remain more normal.

"Just how many times its original weight did the queen ant worth of esoteric ore deposits did the queen ant have to consume in order to become that big?" Rui murmured as he focused on the building-sized insect. "I bet that the moment all the esoteric ore deposits are completed, the ants will immediately leave the floor in search of more esoteric ore deposits."

Kane shuddered in horror at the thought while Rui marveled at how fascinating it all was.

"The tunnels being overrun with monster ants sounds like a nightmare,"

"I wonder if there would be inter-floor wars between multiple floors, fighting for esoteric ores if that did happen," Rui wondered. "That would actually be incredibly entertaining. Imagine of these ants faced off against bloodfury rabbits, or Shionel Taipans, or that Earthen Basilisk, or that giant tree!"

Kane just threw an odd look at Rui who grew fascinated by what he saw.

Such a scenario would definitely be horrible for all Martial Squire adventurers. Just traveling in the Shionel Dungeon would become a menace to all Martial Squires. Though he wasn't sure how likely such a scenario was, he wasn't worried either. With Kane's Void Step and his Riemannian Echo and other tricks, the ants would never be a problem when traveling the dungeon.

His eyes suddenly widened as a smirk formed on his face.

"What is it?" Kane threw him a wary look.

"You don't sound pleased,"

"You look pleased," Kane retorted. "Which, inside the dungeon, does not bode well for everyone else."

"That's slander," However, Rui's smirk had not dropped yet. "I just had the most brilliant idea, Kane."

"It's simple," Rui turned back to the ant mountain. "These ants are gathering esoteric ore deposits as food from across the dungeon floor. Due to the fact that dungeon floors are abundant in esoteric ore deposits, they haven't left the floor yet. However, if the esoteric ore deposits disappeared, then they would most likely leave the dungeon floor in search of more esoteric ore deposits."

"That makes sense," Kane nodded slowly. "What exactly does this have to the plan?"

"If such a thing were to happen, then we would be the least affected, correct?" Rui asked him. "After all, we have Riemannian Echo and your Void Step. We can just sidestep any ants we run into."

"Right... So what exactly is your pla-" Kane paused as realization dawned on him.

"Have you figured it out yet?" Rui smirked. "If the only reason they haven't left the floor is because of a surplus of esoteric ore deposits then what do you think they're going to do if all of the ore deposits in the floor and in their stockpile disappear... like if we took them?"

"They'll probably leave the floor in search of more esoteric ore deposits..." Kane murmured. "Thereby causing a ton of problems for the other Martial Squire adventurers who'll be frequently running into them in this section of the dungeon!"

"Exactly," Rui smirked. "Problems for all the other Martial Squires, most of whom are either patroned by a force that is allied with Chairman Deacon, or is hunting us for the bounty that Chairman Deacon has placed on our heads. We ourselves won't suffer much."

"That's a diabolical plan," A mischievous smirk emerged on his face. "You don't to purposely avoid killing even a single ant so that when we plunder and harvest every esoteric ore deposit in this floor, they'll leave the floor in search of more esoteric ore deposits running into and clashing with adventurers."

"It will also hinder their exploration rate and we'll be able to get much ahead."

"Nice plan," Kane nodded. "Let's get going with it then."

"Wait," Rui paused. "Let's verify that the Void Step technique actually works with these ants."

Kane frowned. "It might not?"

"Maybe," Rui replied. "Misdirection only works on sentient beings with a developed sense of awareness. As for whether ants fully satisfy this condition... is debatable."

Rui was not an expert on ants as he had no background in them. He didn't know if his concerns surrounding ants were sound, but it was because he had no idea about them that he wanted to make sure that they weren't caught off-guard when they treated into ant territory.

Thus, he wanted to take some precautions and verify its reliability.

"There's an isolated ant there," He pointed in a direction. "Let's go test it with that."

"Makes sense," Kane nodded.

The two of them sky-walked all the way across the floor in the direction that Rui pointed.

"Woah," Kane murmured as he activated Void Step. "That's bigger than I expected."

The ant was even larger than either of them.

"Yeah, and at that size, it must be insanely strong. Ants have one of the single highest physical strength-to-body mass ratios, meaning they can lift a weight that is exponentially greater than their own body weight. So this ant can probably lift a building with ease."

That made Kane wary. He was aware that neither he nor Rui was that strong at their current stage in the Squire Realm. Martial bodies of Martial Squires naturally grew stronger due to the natural conditioning that came with mastering stronger techniques. The increased healing factor essentially meant that the natural strengthening that came with each round of healing made them grow stronger in the long run.

But neither of them had reached the level of strength where they could casually lift buildings with just raw strength and no Martial Art techniques.

"Alright, let's approach," Rui and Kane walked closer, keeping Void Step active.

It was to their relief that even when they were one meter from the ant, it did not react.

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"Even touching it is possible," Rui murmured as they kept moving to keep the technique active. "Good. I guess it does have a fully developed sense of awareness and self-awareness."

The two of them backed away from it, distancing themselves from the ant.

"Alright, so I guess that means we can begin with the same strategy as always?" Kane asked, glancing at Rui.

"Same strategy for all the esoteric ore deposits that haven't been extracted by the ants," Rui mentioned. "If we want to get the stockpile of esoteric ore deposits at the center of the ant mountain, then we need to make sure that we're perfectly prepared to time that. If you run out of gas in the middle of the ant mountain, then you're probably going to die. I don't know if I can even protect myself, let alone both of us inside the ant mountain being swarmed by thousands of Squire-level ants."

Kane's expression grew severe. He appreciated that Rui was dead honest with him and informed him of the stakes involved.

"Let's finish all the remaining esoteric ore deposits before we handle the deposits stockpiled by the ants, then," Kane told him.

"Agreed," Rui nodded as the two of them immediately got to work.

Chapter 884: Enter

Rui grew fascinated by the ants as the two of them began vigorously extracting the esoteric ore deposits one by one. They aggressively went all out with picking and storing them in the dimensional storage ring.

The reason for this was they didn't have any time to waste. Unlike with the other dungeon floors, they were on a time limit. They had to get as many esoteric ore deposits as they could before the ants, despite their slow pace, found and extracted all of them.

Unlike normal, the two of them worked till they were absolutely exhausted, before immediately consuming rejuvenation potions to bring themselves back to their peaks.

It was only half a day before they completely drained all of the esoteric ore deposits of the seventeenth floor, barring the stockpile at the center of the ant mountain.

"Have another physical rejuvenation potion," Rui told him. "Also, have a mental rejuvenation potion too."

"I just had a physical one a while back," Kane frowned.

"I know," Rui nodded. "But it is best if you're at your absolute peak for this, wasting a potion is better than dying."

"Alright," Kane sighed before quickly consuming two potions in rapid succession. "Now what?"

"Your max time limit for a single rung of Void Step is twenty minutes," Rui told him. "That's not enough time to get all of the esoteric ore deposits in the center of the ant mountain when you factor in the time needed to get in and out of the ant mountain."

"What do we do then?" Kane frowned. "Do we go in for a second round?"

"No," Rui shook his head. "We should be able to get around seventy-five or eighty percent of the esoteric ore deposits, we'll leave the rest back here."

"You want to leave behind that much?" Kane furrowed his eyebrows.

Twenty percent may seem small, but given the sheer amount of revenue that the esoteric ore deposits of a single floor could yield, that was no different from leaving behind dozens of millions of Kandrian gold coins worth of esoteric ore deposits.

"Yeah," Rui nodded. "The reason for that is because it is quite likely that the queen ant needs those esoteric ore deposits to reproduce and lay eggs producing monsterified ants. Without it, she most likely will be unable to reproduce to replace the slain ants that will run into Martial Squire adventurers."

"Meaning...?"

"Meaning the ants won't be a permanent threat to the Martial Squires without it. If she has enough to reproduce the slain soldiers in time for the new supply of esoteric ore deposits to come from the ants who returned after leaving the floor, then she'll be able to maintain a rate of reproduction that matches the rate of the ants dying against Martial Squires, what that means is that unless the Martial Squires

actually find the seventeenth floor and kill the queen ant, the ants will never stop being a threat and never stop being replenished. They will be able to hinder the other adventurers even more if we make sure to leave behind some esoteric ore deposits to ensure that the queen can sustain the population."

"So those esoteric ore deposits we leave behind are kind of like a commission from us to the ants to hinder the other adventurers as much as possible. The ants are kind of like mercenaries, and we are the clients," Kane understood Rui's plan, likening it to a human analogy.

"More or less," Rui chuckled. "Although the ants are unaware of this deal and aren't exactly consenting. So it's closer to us manipulating them to get what we want. It's an effective way to essentially convert a part of our profits into hindering our opponents."

"And you're sure that they'll leave the dungeon to get more esoteric ore deposits?" Kane asked, with a dubious expression. "I thought you didn't have that much knowledge on the ants."

"You're right, I don't. But I have other ways to ascertain what they'll do,"

Rui turned back towards them as he paid attention to the macro and micro-gestures that they made in addition to the sounds they produced.

It wasn't every day he got to use his Fauna Flow technique, one that allowed him to accurately interpret animalistic communication and even communicate using that same language, but it was useful in times like these.

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That was the only thing these ants conveyed when he interpreted their auditory and non-verbal communication. They were like drones, or robots with no other thought process at all. It was also why he was unsure whether these incredibly inhumane creatures were even susceptible to the Void Step technique.

"Alright, if you say so," Kane shrugged. He was already accustomed to trusting Rui over matters like this, and so far Rui had an almost perfect track record.

"Alright, you should make sure your mental state is absolutely ready for what we are about to endeavor on," Rui told him. "I honestly don't mind if you take your time to center and focus yourself. It's worth it."

"Then I'll take you up on that," Kane replied as he settled in a tunnel, cross-legged as he closed his eyes.

He quickly employed a breathing technique that aided with concentration. Rui could feel the pressure that Kane was radiating increasing as time passed as he was bringing out everything he had.

Fifteen minutes later, a faint sense of pressure prickled at Rui as Kane opened his eyes. Kane was truly at his peak at the moment.

"Let's go," He told Rui simply, putting a hand on his shoulder.

"Right," Rui smiled. "Activate Void Step when I tell you."

The two of them immediately set out towards the ant mountain, before getting close enough to be spotted by the ants.

"Now," Rui told him.

Kane immediately activated the technique. The two of them immediately dived into a tunnel leading into the mountain as they disappeared out of the field of vision of the ants, who promptly returned to their jobs as if nothing happened.

Chapter 885: Screech

Rui wasn't afraid that the ants that were spotted would go back and report to the queen ant. The ants did not possess such a sophisticated system in place. He observed that despite being monsterified and growing larger, they had not gained much, if any intelligence, at all.

"Right... Left... Straight," Rui murmured as they sped through the contorting tunnels of the Shionel Dungeon.

Rui couldn't help but sigh at the tendency of the ants to construct a dizzying maze as opposed to just making straight paths from the outside to the core. That would make their job so much easier and reduce the risks by a lot.

Still, Rui was quite confident. He had constructed extensive predictive models on the ants from the very moment he detected the cavity at the center of the ant mountain with the stash of esoteric ore deposits. Even if the ants were hilariously simplistic, he was not going to hold back out of some sense of arrogance.

This helped as he quickly extrapolated the future movements of all the ants within his sensory vision. Avoiding ants that fell from the ceiling of the tunnel out of nowhere, or even being forced to kill them with the Bellhorn blade and Pipe that he had at hand to use at any moment.

"We're close, you doing fine?" Rui asked, glancing at Kane.

"Great," Kane replied simply, focusing on making sure the technique was flawless. It was a mental technique, and when he concentrated on it fully, he couldn't dedicate much of his attention to anything else, including conversation.

"It's just up ahead," Rui narrowed his eyes as they approached the giant queen ant, getting closer and closer. Rui had a feeling she was different from the rest of the mindless ants, just based purely on her movements alone.

Soon enough, they entered the center of the ant mountain.

The giant queen ant was just up ahead of them, menacingly looming over the entire cavity.

Rui and Kane immediately felt a sense of threat emanating from the giant insect. Rui sensed that even with his Bellhorn Sword and hot air pipe, killing the queen bee would be extremely difficult. Primordial Instinct warned him not to go anywhere near the creature.

There was a great amount of power hidden within her frame, without a doubt, but more than anything, it was her eyes that inspired fear.

They were a grotesque fusion of insect eyes and mammalian eyes. Each of the little hexagons on her ant eyes was a mammalian eye with a sharp pupil at the center. It was an unholy fusion of the two, and Rui wasn't even sure how she came to develop such eyes.

For a second, he was afraid that her vision was sharp enough to spot them despite Void Step, which would be a disaster, but luckily Kane and his technique held strong as she didn't so much as bat an eye, or eyes, at them.

Rui was still extremely wary, however, just one look at her eyes and he could tell that the creature was intelligent. Each of her motions had a purpose, whether it was to adjust the many eggs behind her through which the silhouette of partially formed ant larvae could be seen, or to consume more food, she most certainly was not a mindless insect like her offspring were.

"Let's get this finished as soon as possible,"

Rui and Kane immediately dove into the treasure trove, before quickly storing esoteric ore deposits into his dimensional storage ring at a quick pace. He did not want to spend any more time here than he needed to.

The best part of the Void Step technique was that it obscured objects with the domain of Kane's technique's influence, meaning as long as Kane and Rui were interacting with the esoteric ore deposits that they stole, it would not be noticed barring extreme cases.

However, it would not be noticed directly, that did not mean it could not be noticed indirectly. Eventually, the stockpile's size decreased greatly, and no amount of misdirection would be able to prevent the queen from noticing that. Thus, the two of them worked quicker.

The best part was that the esoteric ore deposits were already extracted, they were simply tossed into a huge pile of other glowing rocks and biological matter.

Thus Rui was able to store them at an incredible pace. It wasn't long before the two of them come close to reaching the quota of the stockpile that they had.

Unfortunately, before they quite finished. The ant queen who had been quite busy with the birthing process immediately realized something as gravely wrong when she turned to the stockpile to gather more servings of nourishment.

Its many eyes ran back and forth across the entire cavity, getting closer to the stockpile to sense it clearly, due to the sensory jamming effect that hampered her senses from perceiving the fact that huge portion of the stockpile were empty.

"KIEEEEEEEERKH!" It released a deafening screech, producing a titanicly powerful shockwave released from just its alone!

"Argh!" Rui and Kane grimaced as the two of them immediately shot out of the room, being hit by a powerful Squire-level shockwave, causing the entire ant-mountain to tremble!

Thankfully, Kane had prepared himself for this ever since this exact same thing had happened on the sixteenth floor with the trigger-happy grade-ten Martial Squire hitting them with a wide-area long-range wind attack.

This time, he didn't falter, due to having made changes to his mindset to be able to handle such a thing, and also because of the fact that he was at his absolute peak. He would not have been able to maintain his technique under such circumstances if not for these two factors.

The two of them shot through the increasingly dense tunnels of the ant mountains as a surge of ants running towards the queen's distress call began clogging the tunnels.

There were so many ants that if they stopped for even a moment, causing the technique to forcibly break, they would be dead meat!

Chapter 886: Escape

Rui and Kane were shocked, but they forcibly suppressed their reactions as they focused everything they had on getting out. If the two of them made even a single mistake, it would truly be game over. Even Rui did not think he could survive an endless wave of Squire-level ants attacking him from all directions simultaneously.

Both of them needed to do their jobs just perfectly. Kane needed to maintain Void Step and ensure that he never stopped, even if Rui did, since he was the one maintaining the Void Step technique.

Rui, on the other hand, was responsible for navigating the way out. However, he couldn't just pick the most straightforward path since a lot of these paths were getting clogged up with ants that were rushing in. He needed to not only find paths that were free enough for them to travel through but also paths that weren't clogged up yet.

Not only that but he pushed himself to the absolute limit as he used the singular predictive model he had on the ants due to how similar they were to predict which tunnels would not get clogged and blocked, leading them to most likely eventually be detected as they would probably lose any room to move at some point.

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Rui and Kane endured the pain of being cut by the extended claws of the passing ants with grim expressions. Making it out alive was their highest priority at the moment, such wounds were inconsequential.

"There it is! The exit!" Rui's expression lit up as they shot toward the end of the tunnel leading outside, before finally exiting the ant mountain.

The two of them heaved a sigh of relief amidst their pants.

"What the hell happened?" Kane asked, now that they were finally safe.

"The ant queen noticed the fact that most of their stockpile had gone when she came over for more supplies," Rui explained. "The ants simply responded to her call and immediately went rushing in towards her. That's why the tunnels were being clogged with those ants rushing towards her."

"I see," Kane nodded. "Well, I'm glad we made it out of that mess. Dying there would have been quite painful. Shame we didn't get the entirety of our quote though, there was still a bit left behind before she interrupted us."

"It's fine," Rui remarked calmly. "Let her have it. It'll probably benefit us. Look."

Rui gestured towards the mountain. The next moment, all the ants immediately emerged from the tunnels of the ant mountain before climbing out of the floor through the many tunnels.

"These ants are heading out of the floor this quickly?" Kane raised an eyebrow.

"Of course, the queen ant is agitated by a sudden shortage in their stockpile, she'll no doubt be paying greater attention to them from here on out. Just now, she instructed the ants to find and bring her more esoteric ore deposits as soon as possible," Rui translated her instructions to the rest of the ants.

"I see, so we succeeded," Kane smirked.

He considered the plan that Rui had come up with to be a little insane, but he understood that if Rui thought it worked, then it probably was a pretty good plan.

"Whoever runs into the queen is going to have quite a lot of difficulty," Rui remarked.

"Hell yes," Kane eagerly agreed. "What kind of creature is able to scream that powerfully? How powerful would its actual attacks be? Its body is far more powerful than even a grade-ten Martial Squire's body, if not for its lack of Martial Art techniques and its unwieldy size, it would be a force entirely unfit for the Squire Realm."

"That's quite accurate," Rui nodded. "In my estimation, a grade-ten Martial Squire alone is going to be insufficient to take down the queen. Most likely one will require a powerful S-rank adventurer team to kill her. And that's assuming that none of her ants are around."

"True, man, taking on the entirety of all ten thousand ants, and the queen, that's something only Martial Seniors can do, right?" Kane asked.

"Yeah," Rui nodded. "No Martial Squire is taking on that floor. The dungeon as a whole is definitely a Senior level threat. Still, as for whether it would be able to beat a Martial Senior..."

Rui did not dare say that it even could.

He still deeply remembered the battle of the three Martial Seniors in Vilun Island, the sheer power that each Martial Senior displayed made a lasting impression on him.

"... It probably can't," Rui shook his head. "Not even this giant dungeon that is the target of my objectives, is a match for a Martial Senior. It does make me feel small."

"Well, you're just a grade-six Martial Squire," Kane shrugged. "Give it time, and I'm sure you'll become extremely strong. You're definitely going to reach the Senior Realm."

Rui appreciated Kane's vote of confidence, but given that he knew just as much or less about the Senior Realm, it wasn't very reassuring.

"What do we do now?" Kane asked.

"Well, we're done for now," Rui nodded. "We need to get the esoteric ore deposits back to the Kandrian Empire soon enough anyway. We can harvest anymore with the energy consumption and storage limit of the dimensional storage ring."

"Right, let's head back and come for the dungeon again?" Kane asked.

"I want to spend some time looking into the effects of the ants scouring the Shionel Dungeon," Rui replied. "I am curious about certain things that might be relevant to our future plans..."

Ants generally had an excellent sense of smell and could track food from great distances away, he was wondering if that could help them track different sources for esoteric ore deposits by virtue of esoteric ore deposits being their food. In that case, the ants might actually allow him to detect other floors with great ease. All he would need to was keep track of their path every time they got a new food source.

Chapter 887: East

It seemed as though Shionel Confederation was unable to get a break from shocking news surrounding the Shionel Dungeon time and time again.

Even prior to the first appearance of the Voider, things had been exciting and riveting, but that was because the Shionel Dungeon was still a brand-new novelty. Even the slightest bit of new news was extremely interesting.

After a while, things cooled down as a bit of a routine entered the nation with the dungeon. It was hard remaining as extremely excited with the same stuff happening for the eleventh time in a row.

Things had changed with the arrival of the Voider who made things exciting once more, with the various surprises and astonishing feats that they achieved.

The latest shock, however, didn't seem to have anything to do with them. Many reports came in reporting of a flood of ants that assaulted many Martial Squires.

This was new.

Adventurer after adventurer began narrating tales of how they were trying to explore new routes before giant people-sized monster ants came their way and attacked them. Reports indicated that each individual ant was not much, but together they were a menace, an overwhelming majority of Martial Squires simply chose to not engage with the monsters unprepared and promptly retreated away.

Many of the newer adventurers had arrived with the latest wave of incoming Martial Squires into the nation, they were completely overwhelmed by the ants, and many parties went missing or were confirmed dead.

The country was shocked at the news of the many Martial Artists reporting the same nightmarish scene over and over. Many began speculating what happened, looking into the information available.

"It has to be a new floor!"

"But monsters don't leave their floors in such numbers, that doesn't make any sense."

"Maybe the monsters of the deeper floors are capable of leaving their floor and attacking those that get too close."

"If that was the case, then we would have seen that before!"

Many of the laymen and civilians who were simply interested in new gossip and news that the Shionel Dungeon produced had no idea what it was, but the same could not be said for relevant experts, as well as those with greater ability to gather and access information.

"The initial encounters occurred at the extreme east of the Dungeon," Chairman Deacon murmured in his office as he scoured through the many documents scattered on his table containing analyses and reports of all kinds surrounding the recent event. "On top of that, the location of the encounters began spreading out in all directions after the initial encounters. This... This resembles expansion or migration. There must be a dungeon floor somewhere deep in the far Eastern side of the dungeon. The ants must have emerged from there for whatever reason and begun migrating outwards."

His eyes twinkled as he realized that, yet there was also a glint of suspicion. He was definitely going to look into that floor no matter what. However, he feared being the victim of the Voider's designs once more. He could tolerate losing the prize of the sixteenth floor to the Voider due to the juicy information he learned about the Voider, but he could not allow it to happen again.

What if the Voider aimed to steal his prize from him once more? If that were the case then he would have no choice but to take it as it came. He could not let suspicions of the Voider's interference get in the way of finding and clearing the dungeon while plundering all the esoteric ore deposits.

"This time I have a stronger army of explorers," He narrowed his eyes. "Just you dare show yourself. You got by last time, this time we'll get you."

One of the reasons he was tolerant of the loss suffered last time was that he had developed a better solution. Squire Harens fiasco had shown him that the Voider operated with stealth, somehow, most likely one or more Martial Art techniques. Furthermore, the technique could be disrupted with a wide-area attack of enough magnitude of power.

This caused him to develop a new set of positional strategic and tactical measures that would make them most equipped to deal with the Voider if he ever did appear. What he was hoping for was that Voider would appear, and he would nail him with a similar wide-area attack that would disrupt his stealth technique, which would cause the Martial Squires especially positioned to employ wide-scale barricading techniques to restrict their movement.

In that time, the Voider would be bombarded with multiple grade-ten Martial Squires in close range.

In his estimation, even if the Voider was a truly veteran-grade-ten Martial Squire, he did not think he would be able to escape this trap.

He even partially hoped that the Voider would dare to appear and try to steal his plunder again, even if it was risky. It presented him with a chance to capture the pesky rat for once!

"Oh, the things I'm going to do to you if I ever get my hands on you," An expression of murderous rage appeared on his face.

First, he would extract all of the Voider's secrets. It was a fact that his methods were extraordinarily successful, and if Chairman Deacon managed to harness them, then his success would grow to become titanic.

After that, he would kill the Voider painfully.

He sighed, shaking his head. His hatred for the Voider had grown as time passed. To the point that sometimes he would indulge in it too much.

"Catch him first, then we can focus on all of that," He muttered before getting to work.

He immediately intended to arrange for an expedition into the far eastern side of the Shionel Dungeon that would allow him to gain access to a fresh source of esoteric ore deposits. He desperately needed supplies, otherwise, he would definitely begin losing some of the gains he made from the Shionel Dungeon, that was for sure.

Chapter 888: Inferences

At the same time, in another part of the Shionel Confederation, another man was also engrossed in deep thought.

"Hm..." Guildmaster Bradt went skimmed through the pages of a letter, narrowing his eyes.

It was because he was one of the most well-informed men thanks to being in possession of the most sophisticated intelligence network in the Shionel Confederation, that he knew. He was able to tell with one glance.

"These are all organizations and parties of the Kandrian Empire," The man frowned. "On top of that..."

He knew were a fact that many of these companies were simply shell companies that were simply a mask for the Underworld to operate through. Many of these were avenues for money laundering and served as a legitimate 'face' for black money.

He had minimized his interactions with the Underworld of human civilization, especially when the Shionel Confederation ironically had the least amount of illicit business occurring within its borders.

The reason for this was that the Shionel Confederation had decriminalized all goods and services when Guildmaster Bradt took office, implementing libertarian policies.

He had avoided the Underworld in his nation this way, and that principle followed on to interacting with the mafia of other nations. He avoided them all like the plague, even though his services were highly desired by the Underworld.

However, in order to avoid dealing with them, he needed to know who 'they' were. Thus he had kept tabs on the various faces and masks that the Underworld employed.

That was why he came to the suspicion that it wasn't a coincidence that among the companies he did recognize, all of them were shady companies and individuals with shady ties.

"Could it be...?" Guildmaster Bradt narrowed his eyes.

When he initially read through the contents of the letter, he had been displeased by the decision to exclude a large number of organizations and individuals from the list of clientele that Esosale Suppliers would be interacting with. However, now that he had gotten a clue about the Voider's identity, he wasn't too miffed about this change.

"The Voider is most likely connected to the Kandrian Empire somehow," He murmured.

This was the first concrete piece of information that he had come across regarding the origin of the Voider.

However, there was always the possibility that this was a red herring. It could be that the Voider was just trying to throw him off by tricking him into investing an immense amount of time into looking for his identity in the Kandrian Empire. This was something that he could not deny and needed to take into account.

He knew for a fact that the Voider was quite intelligent and competent. This meant that this was perfectly viable to be a trap.

On the other hand, it didn't click right for him. ('A trap would be much more alluring and inviting. This alone would not guarantee for him that I would fall for it.')

That was why he was a bit hesitant to spend too much on the matter.

"I want the intelligence reports on Martial Commissioner Reze of the Martial Union and Ambassador Garton on their time in the Shionel Confederation," He immediately instructed his secretary.

"Yes sir," She bowed.

Soon enough, he came to be in possession of the files that he requested.

"So Martial Commissioner Reze and the Kandrian Ambassador never left their hotel room even once?" He raised an eyebrow before huffing. Had he known the Kandrian Empire possessed a connection to the Voider he would have placed them under greater surveillance.

He tentatively trusted the report, though he made sure to consider the alternatives. He did not think the timing of the delegates from the Kandrian Empire and the Voider's latest company directive was a coincidence. There was most likely some connection, but he was unable to figure out what it was.

Regardless, he tried approaching it from another angle.

('Why would the Voider make such an initiative when he was happily executing what we agreed upon?') He raised an eyebrow, surprised.

There most likely reason was that he had a deal with interest groups with a severe clash of interests with the Underworld of the Kandrian Empire.

There were only a handful of organizations with such interests that were powerful enough to entertain the consideration of acting against the interests of the black market.

That narrowed things down considerably.

('The Royal Family... and the Martial Union,') He quickly surmised.

Had the Royal Family unveiled some legendary trump card that they were planning to dominate the Shionel Dungeon?

He immediately tossed this possibility out of his mind, it was absurd that an apostle of the Royal Family would have to scramble to make a deal with him in the first place. There was simply no way such a thing could possibly happen. Such a thing would be unnecessary if he was allied with either the Royal Family or the Martial Union in the first place.

('Maybe... they are allied now but weren't from the start,') Guildmaster Bradt postulated. ('In which case, could it be that he was discovered by some Kandrian entity?')

He felt as though he was coming close to the truth. He couldn't imagine that the Volder would approach the Kandrian Empire given how staunchly independent barring his collaboration with Guildmaster Bradt.

Although Guildmaster Bradt was certainly happier about coming closer to his mysterious partner's true identity, he realized he needed to be more careful than before. Based on the fact that the Volder's supply schedule and penchant to create chaos in the dungeon had not changed, Guildmaster Bradt speculated that it was still the Volder handling all the dungeon matters.

This meant that any agreement he had with the Kandrian Empire or Martial Union was most likely limited such that the latter did not infringe on the former's operations. Most likely, the latter wanted a cut, in exchange for some extraneous aid.

Still, this meant that he could not pressure the Volder as much even if he did learn of his ability, not with the Kandrian Empire looking out for its golden boy.

Chapter 889: Aimless

"ARGH! There's more of the ants coming in from this direction!"

"We're boxed in!"

"We need to find a way out, or else we're doomed!"

Many adventurers experienced a great deal of difficulty when it came to the ants. There were issues with the way in which they operated that influenced their choices. Many adventurers that used to explore individually, were forced to form makeshift parties with other adventurers in order to cope with the increased difficulty of even traveling in the dungeon's tunnels.

The ants' concentration became less dense the more they spread out across the tunnels looking for esoteric ore deposits to extract and supply back to the queen ant. One of the possibilities that Rui had conceived of was the possibility that the ants would be able to use their sense of smell and easily locate sources of esoteric ore deposits.

Name, floors.

The reason he held this hope was because he knew that insects held obscenely powerful senses of smell. Their ability to track via scent was absolutely gigantic, given their size. Some insects could even track certain things from thousands of kilometers away!

Ants were not at the top of the list in the animal kingdom but they were quite respectable in that regard. Rui hoped that there the ants would be able to track floors using their sense of smell, by smelling esoteric ore deposits. This way, he could track the ants tracking the esoteric ore deposits.

With his Riemannian Echo, he would always be the one to detect the fact that the ants had detected a new dungeon floor. And thus he would always find that floor through the ants before anyone else.

Thus, he would effectively turn the ants into his exploration team. That was his true ambition. If it panned out, his rate of success would become tremendously higher. One of the things that he would be able to prevent wasting hours in the Shionel Dungeon searching for new floors.

"Unfortunately... It doesn't seem like it will pan out," Rui murmured.

The ants did not seem to have the ability to track esoteric ore deposits using their sense of smell. In fact, from what Rui could see. The ants did not even have the ability to retain their sense of direction due to the planet's magnetic field being jammed inside the Shionel dungeon. Many of the ants that left the

dungeon got lost and were unable to return home due to losing the path that they came from due to their sense of direction being sabotaged.

Furthermore, they did not have a great amount of success with finding esoteric ore deposits. For the most part, they spent their time finding minor ore deposits in the tunnels here and there, but the Shionel dungeon jammed senses too much for them to be able to track them across the entire dungeon,

"Shame," He shook his head.

"It's not working out?" Kane asked.

"It doesn't seem to be, no," Rui replied.

The two of them had spent some time in the dungeon observing whether the ants could be used to track new floors, but Rui had come to the unfortunate conclusion that they would not be of use in the long run.

"It's fine, the ants have already done us a huge favor," Rui smirked.

For the first time since the opening of the Shionel Confederation, the number of Martial Squires entering the dungeon daily had not only plateaued but had also begun a mild downward trend despite the recent influx of Martial Squires into the Shionel dungeon.

Although experts had predicted that this was only a temporary trend and that Martial Squires would begin exploring the dungeon once the situation with the ants had lightened and stabilized.

However, it meant that a lot of freelancers and independent Martial Squires looking for some small successes in the dungeon were becoming hesitant due to the increased risk and danger. While the contracted Martial Squires who were being patroned, or employed by certain companies, renegotiated with their patrons and employers for greater compensation for the greater risk being undertaken by them as they traveled the dungeon.

Regardless, part of the threat by Chairman Deacon and his little alliance in aggressively exploring the Shionel Dungeon by combining all their forces together had reduced. They couldn't deploy as many Martial Squire teams for exploration since the number of Martial Squires needed to protect each team had increased.

Rui and Kane on the other hand were much less stressed about. Rui could see every ant coming from kilometers away, and Kane made it so that they would ignore them every time.

The two of them set out in the dungeon and began exploring new paths in the Shionel Dungeon. Although the ants had not directly led them to a new floor, Rui suspected the existence of a dungeon floor further downwards well below the ant floor. The reason for this was that he had observed several ants returning to the ant floor from lower depths with significant injuries.

To Rui, this suggested the presence of a threat that was most likely static or fixed in one place.

Considering that monsters roaming around tunnels rarely stuck in one place, Rui had keenly deduced that the cause of the injuries that these ants had suffered that one time was due to accidentally entering a new floor, and being attacked by a monster. That was the most likely explanation in his mind.

"I've seen enough, the ants are useful, but this is the extent to which we can use them," Rui told Kane. "Let's get started, we have our own exploration to begin."

The two of them peered over a large tunnel that de-escalated downwards extremely steeply for quite some distance. This would be extremely dangerous and risky for humans, and potentially dangerous even for Martial Apprentices. But the two of them simply sky-walked downwards as they made their way down the tunnel, looking for a new adventure while still being extremely wary of anything dangerous.

Chapter 890: Ecosystem

The two of them proceeded down the dark tunnel that steeply led them into even greater depths. While twirling and contorting around as it drew them deeper into the dungeon. Rui had long come to accept and even disdain the dungeon's tendency to have tunnels that curled around extremely as it led them around. The reason for this was that it made it impossible to move around at their top speed, or anywhere even near it.

The same limitations that prevented humans from running at their top speed, when on a proper sprinting track, while climbing and trekking through a cave maze were the same limitations that prevented adventurers from traveling across the Shionel Dungeon at extremely high speeds.

They simply couldn't due to how much the tracks turned and curled around. There were also security concerns with moving that fast in such a dangerous and risky environment even if Rui could sense his environment thoroughly using Riemannian Echo. Thus the two, like all Martial Squires, had to move somewhat slowly and steadily.

Still, it wasn't long before Rui ran into something.

"An ant corpse," Rui noted as he descended to the ground. "This is definitely not the work of a Martial Artist unless Nel became a Martial Squire and has been in the Shionel Dungeon all this time."

The corpse was a mess, and most of its insides had been disemboweled and extracted. There was simply no need for any Martial Squire to go to this length against a monster. That, along with the previous injuries that he had seen from other ants led him to be more certain that he was probably onto something in this space. The two of them began traveling further before Rui's eyes lit up.

"It's plundering time," Rui grinned. "I was right, there was a floor in this part of the dungeon."

"This time we managed to avoid searching like crazy for hours," Kane remarked happily.

"True," Rui nodded.

The two of them hurried forward before Rui began being able to sense a greater portion of the dungeon the closer they got to it.

"It has a lot of vegetation," He frowned. This wasn't unheard of, Some of the earliest floors discovered in the dungeon had some amount of vegetation, furthermore, Rui and Kane had discovered the dungeon with the largest tree that they had ever seen before. Thus it wasn't exactly unprecedented even if it was unusual.

"Like, normal vegetation?" Kane asked with a raised eyebrow. "No freak-sized trees or anything?"

"Well it is big, but it feels like an enlarged version of pretty standard vegetation. Like grass, shrubs, and trees," Rui explained.

"What about the monsters?" Kane asked. He cared more about the threats than the scenery.

"About that..." Rui's eyes narrowed. "... I think there might be more than one kind of monster."

"Huh." Kane frowned. "That's new."

Rui nodded as he considered his senses more deeply. "It's hard to tell for sure from this distance. But I can definitely send distinct creatures across the entire floor."

Rui had to admit that it was a little strange that there were different species of creatures on the new floor. There were very few ways in which such creatures could coexist. One of the reasons that there was no infighting between monsters of the same species within the Shionel dungeon was because of the fact that there was an in-species tribal instinct.

This was an evolutionary trait that was baked into most species since species with a tendency to not cooperate and even fight would not survive in the long run.

However, this tribal trait did not exist between different species. Different species were usually in conflict with each other, thus peaceful harmony was never impossible.

('In that case... the obvious answer is...') Rui paused as they finally reached the floor as he was able to sense it in its vast entirety. ('...an ecosystem.')

He grew immensely curious as his Riemannian Echo washed across the entirety of the floor at once, picking up all of the details.

('Birds, snakes, rats, insects, and various kinds of flora,') He mused.

This was a surprisingly normal and generic form of ecosystem. He had expected something far beyond the norms of normal with the Shionel Dungeon. However, it seems that tried and true paradigms in nature were prone to recurring.

"Except this is a monsterified version of them," Rui murmured.

"Hm?" Kane glanced back at Rui.

"This is quite incredible," Rui said out loud. "This is the first time that we have ever run into a floor that contains an ecosystem of monsters. This is definitely one of the most complex floors that we have ever run into before."

"Uh huh," Kane perfunctorily replied. "What of the esoteric ore deposits? That's why we're here, you know."

"They're everywhere," Rui muttered. "We got ourselves a real bounty this time. We won't be able to drain the entire dungeon in a single go this time. This is definitely one of the largest floors that we have ever come across."

"Damn," Kane grinned. "There aren't that many floors that we haven't been able to clear in a single go, you know."

"I suspect that this will continue being the norm," Rui speculated. "It generally is a trend that floors are getting larger, barring a few understandable exceptions."

"Good for us," Kane shrugged. "Let's get started."

"No, wait, I want to do some basic recon on the floor. This may be a little more complicated than the other floors, that's for sure," Rui narrowed his eyes as he began collecting more information on all the creatures in the dungeon.

He had been under the impression that monsters were nothing more than unviable mutations of existing creatures whose sustenance and survival were deeply flawed and distorted. He had thought that it was impossible for such creatures to have sophisticated lives amongst fellow mutated creatures of their species and others in a complex ecosystem, but he had begun changing his mind on that particular topic with recent events.