

Martial Unity 1601

Chapter 1601: Experience

"Because the yielded attunement from the added unrefined individuality is low, you make very little progress with drawing out the potential of your mind, leaving it weak. Because it is weak, it cannot survive the Squire evolution breakthrough process," Rui explained patiently. "That is why you haven't reached Squire's candidacy."

Prince Raijun was shocked by the revelation.

He had long grown frustrated with his lack of progress, especially since he had always fostered a deep sense of admiration for Martial Artists.

How could he not? Rather, he never understood why none of his brothers and sisters felt the same way.

Martial Artists were strong!

Martial Masters did not lower their head or chin even in the presence of the Royal Family, barring the Royal Emperor.

Martial Sages bowed to nobody.

All thanks to their personal power. The power that they themselves had cultivated, belonged to them. That nobody could take from them.

He had been overjoyed when he became a Martial Apprentice at the optimistically young age of fourteen. While that age had not crossed into genius-level territory, it was a sign of a great talent and affinity for Martial Art.

It also happened to be the same age that Rui broke through to the Apprentice Realm. Yet despite twenty years of commitment to his Martial Art and Path, he had never reached Squire candidacy.

He never understood why.

Today, he did.

It was actually astonishing how simple the problem was.

'No, it's simple because he accurately understood it and then assimilated and conveyed it in a brief and concise manner that made it simple to understand,' He realized. 'Not even Martial Masters had such a conscious grasp of the problem on a theoretical level. He explained the problem the way a scientist would, rather than a Martial Artist.'

He had tales of Rui's scholarly knowledge, only now did he experience it firsthand.

However, he wasn't interested in that at the moment.

"What is the solution for my lack of refinement? Why did it even come to be about in the first place?" The prince asked desperately, throwing aside all of his royal bearing.

"Those questions may as well be the same," Rui remarked. "They share the same answer after all. The cause of your problem is the same as the solution or lack thereof."

He stared straight into Prince Raijun's eyes. "Experience."

"Experience...?" Prince Raijun murmured.

Rui nodded. "Experience is the only way to refine Martial Art. That's how I, and every other Martial Art, have refined Martial Art. Tell me, Prince Raijun, when was the last time you fought genuine conflicts and battles where death was a realistic outcome?"

Prince Raijun's head lowered with shame.

"Don't tell me..." Rui's eyes widened. "You haven't experienced any life-or-death battles at all in your entire life?"

"..."

Rui stared at the man with bewilderment. "I knew you were inexperienced from the very first punch you threw. But not a single battle with your life on the line? Seriously? Surely you jest? There's no way there exists a Martial Artist that has never once staked their life in battle. I mean, come on now..."

As Rui continued, Prince Raijun only grew more embarrassed and ashamed.

"I can't help it!" He protested. "I'm a prince! Do you have many enemies I have because of my status? There are countless people and nations that don't think well of the Kandrian Empire or the Royal Family! I'll be assassinated in a heartbeat if I try anything!"

Rui paused for a moment. "I'm aware of that. But you need to balance risk with reward."

"Even if I wanted to, I cannot. We, children of the Empire, are constrained by security protocols of the state much more harshly than you can imagine. Especially since my late brother died nearly five years ago because he did precisely what you are suggesting to me."

Rui paused once more, confused.

The Martial Prince heaved a sigh. "Prince Raese Von Kandria died five years ago en route to the Kandrian Empire from the Virodhabhasa Theocracy after participating in the seventy-

second Virodhabhasa Martial Contest."

Rui's eyes widened with shock as his mind flashed back to a distant memory that he had almost forgotten.

'That's right! There was the grade-ten Martial Squire prince from the contest,' Rui realized. 'It's been so long and so much has happened that I completely forgot he existed.'

Rui couldn't believe that he had died back then.

"He used to throw himself into life-threatening battles despite knowing the risks for the rewards. He had almost died several times prior to various assassination attempts. Eventually, his luck ran out, and he was wiped out by an extremely powerful Martial Master. Had he returned to the Empire safely, he would be the Martial Prince instead of mere Apprentice like me."

"I see..." Rui murmured.

"This risk has multiplied by a factor of ten because of the Kandrian Throne War," Prince Raijun heaved a tired sigh. "My six siblings would not miss the opportunity to have me assassinated...well, except Raul, that insufferably principled and kind-hearted bastard. Of the remaining more than a hundred siblings that I have, half of them would love to have me assassinated. The risks are astronomical. Thus things like taking missions, commissions, or operations are completely out of the question."

This was indeed problematic, Rui had to admit. He was not impractical, throwing one's self into a situation where an assassination was almost absolutely guaranteed was stupid.

"That's a shame," Rui shrugged lightly. "Good luck overcoming that."

He had already fulfilled his duty to the absolute best he could, probably better than anyone else in the Kandrian Empire would have.

"Please help me overcome this hurdle!" Prince Raijun bowed his head, much to the alarm of the two Martial Masters behind him.

"...What?"

"Lend me your power!" Prince Raijun cried. "You were able to figure out the problem so easily, surely you must have a solution!"

"I'm not a magician, Your Highness," Rui scoffed. "I don't have any solut-

He paused mid-sentence as an idea popped into his head, drawing his interest and curiosity.

"There!" Prince Raijun exclaimed. "I know you just thought of something! I'll give you anything you want, just help me out!"

Chapter 1602: Attempted Deception

Time slowed down in Rui's vision as the Martial Prince nearly froze in place.

He was in a bit of a dilemma.

He just realized that he might be able to help the Martial Prince grow, substituting experience. Normally, this was something that each Martial Artist could only do for themselves, this was not supposed to be something that could be done for anybody by anybody.

That was partly why the Martial Path was solitary.

Nobody could walk it for anybody else.

Yet Rui realized that he might be able to. He might have been perhaps the only Martial Artist who could walk their path for them due to the nature of his Martial Art. In particular, the pattern recognition system of the VOID algorithm was what he thought could help alleviate the prince's problem.

The reason for this was that Rui could easily copy this style if he wanted. In a manner similar to Ieyasu, although not nearly as well. Ieyasu could literally embody a person, and Rui could capture all the patterns and movements of Prince Raijun in the Mind Palace, create predictive models, and then replicate those.

He could simultaneously get rid of the imperfections and micro-flaws in the man's movements. Doing so would allow the prince to literally look at a perfected version of himself.

It would allow him to reach Squire candidacy without any experience at all.

For some reason, Rui deeply disliked that outcome.

The Martial Path was quite sacred, and the journey to power was important and valued. It should have been impossible for anyone to be able to skip or bypass the grueling process by exploiting loopholes.

Yet his Martial Art broke these rules that had been held strong for a long time. If people found out that Rui could allow Martial Artists to progress without nearly as much hard work and progress, it would not be good.

The current attention that he had attracted was reaching the limit that he could comfortably handle.

He was a high-grade Martial Senior, and that did deter people from trying to bully him. It would require Martial Masters, and that was an expenditure of power that was too much to employ.

However, with this revelation in addition to things like the Hungry Pain technique, his value would slowly start to exceed the deterrence that he was able to put out. There could be people who were starting to have dangerous ideas about how to get their hands on the treasure trove that Rui represented.

Of course, Rui's sharp mind had already put together several ideas on how he could increase the deterrence to making an enemy out of him, but that was not the core issue.

The question was whether it was worth it.

It would help Prince Raijun grow at an extreme pace, such that he would be able to break through to the Squire Realm within a short amount of time. That would substantially increase the probability that he would be able to win the Kandrian Throne War and ascend the throne as Emperor simply due to the substantially greater support he would be getting from the Martial Union.

This was an undesirable outcome since he would most likely immediately seek to change the structure of power of the Kandrian Empire with the intention of making the Martial Union the legislative entity in effect.

That would most certainly trigger at least a bit of a civil war as the diehard loyalists of the Royal Family would refuse to accept his first order. Most likely a lot of Martial Artists whose Martial drives were centered around loyalty to the Royal Family would riot in the centers of power, wealth, and influence in the nation.

The Town of Hajin would undoubtedly be a target since it hosted one of the sixteen Martial Academies.

Rui's mind swiftly processed many possible scenarios in just a blink of an eye, ultimately concluding that all of this could likely unfold if Rui decided to help Prince Raijun become a Martial Squire.

However, there was one issue.

He glanced at Prince Raijun as time sped up to normal.

"Our agreement specified that you would make an earnest effort to aid my growth as long as it did not directly directly harm you," Prince Raijun reminded Rui.

This was the issue.

Rui had underestimated how abnormal his Martial Art was. It was also unfortunate that the Martial Prince had stagnated not because of a lack of drive like Rui had thought, but due to a sheltered life and lack of experience.

Not even he could fix the former, which is why he had not been worried, but he did possess the ability to fix the latter. He would liked to have avoided the prince ever learning about it, but it was a true shame that Rui had just had the epiphany at that moment in front of two powerful Martial Masters. He probably would not be able to get away with it.

He briefly considered using a Mind Mask, before immediately recalling that Master Deivon seemed to apparently be able to see the technique itself.

He wasn't sure if he would be able to get away with lying, it depended on how good he was.

Still, worth a try.

"I was considering whether exposing you to bloodlust could sufficiently replicate a genuine life-threatening Martial battle," Rui heaved a troubled sigh. "But unfortunately, that won't work since you consciously know that your life isn't in danger. It will not bear the fruit you would need to fix the micro-flaws in your Martial Art."

The two Martial Masters glanced at him sharply with disapproving expressions. "Do not speak a mix of partial truths and falsehoods with the intention of deceiving His Highness in an attempt to violate the agreement that His Highness offered to you in good faith."

It was an unfortunate yet predictable failure.

Prince Raijun stared at Rui with a hint of hope, disregarding the fact that Rui was lying to him. "So you do have a solution then?"

Chapter 1603: Shocking Revelation

He was unable to deceive them, much to his dismay. However, there were still ways to avoid helping the Martial Prince become a Squire. He stared straight at the Martial Prince. "I am unable to provide you with proof that it will work," Rui replied. "It may even be dangerous to your psyche if your drive for the Squire Realm is weak."

"My drive to reach the Squire Realm is strong, rest assured," The Martial Prince's eyes flashed with determination. "What is this method that you have in mind?"

"Let us not get ahead of ourselves, Your Highness," Rui heaved a sigh. "In the first place, I have made my stance regarding your policies as ruler, have I not?"

"But our agreement..."

"Our agreement also specifies a severance pay for any unwarned discontinuation on my part," Rui replied. "It's expensive, but I can pay for it."

He simply stared at the Martial Prince head-on with a composed expression, conveying a subtle message. Even if Rui could help him, that didn't mean he wanted to, or would.

He had already made his stance about a warmongering nation under the rule of the Martial Artists clear. He did not like what would happen if Prince Raijun became Emperor. So why should he support him by helping him break through to the Squire Realm?

"This goes against the spirit of our agreement, you know," Prince Raijun heaved a sigh.

"I won't insult you by denying that," Rui replied. "Still, there are things more important than principles."

Rui did not deny that he was not acting in good faith. The fact of the matter was that he did agree to help Prince Raijun out earnestly, and now he came to regret that decision, thus he was trying to back out against the spirit of the agreement.

Rui didn't feel good about it, but he felt even worse helping the Martial Prince. Thus he sucked down a bit of his guilt and put up a defiant facade.

Thankfully, the prince was far too driven to reach the Squire Realm to care.

"First, tell me what your solution is," The Martial Prince told Rui with a stern voice. "It could be nothing, or it's possible that your solution is flawed and the two esteemed Masters by my side will inform me if it is."

Rui scoffed inwardly, they weren't even able to articulate the problem that the prince had in a clear-cut manner. While he did not doubt their Martial prowess and wisdom through their centuries of pursuing their Martial Paths, there were things that they couldn't do.

"The solution is rather simple," Rui began with a calm tone. "First, I study your Martial Art and observe it extensively. Then I copy it."

Prince Raijun's eyes widened. "Copy...it?"

"Correct," Rui nodded. "It should be quite simple all things considered. Once I copy it, I will fix all the micro-flaws and then show you how your Martial Art ought to be, then I can train you to fix those flaws with that copied Martial Art."

The three of them stared at Rui with a shocked expression.

"Copy my Martial Art...?" Prince Raijun murmured. "You can do that?"

"Well, yes."

"...Do you have any idea how many years I've worked on my Martial Art?" Prince Raijun softly murmured.

Rui heaved a sigh. "It isn't that big a deal, honestly."

Rui wondered how they would react to Ieyasu's copying if they were stunned by his much inferior ability to replicate.

It just went to show how abnormal both their Martial Art was.

"Such an ability would need to be proven," One of the Martial Master standing beside the prince remarked. "Your word is not credible, Senior Quarrier."

"The prince was the one who asked me what the solution was, I just answered" Rui shrugged. "I still haven't decided to supply the prince with my service, so if I was disbelieved, then that would be fine by me as well."

He didn't particularly care either way, it was just unfortunate that he had an epiphany at the wrong moment, giving it away.

"No," The Prince's determined voice cut through the atmosphere. "You are the most prodigious Martial Senior ever. The potency of your Martial Art is well-known. I believe that there is some credibility to your solution. I'm interested in witnessing it."

"Like I said," Rui replied with a composed but firm tone. "The severance pay is within my wealth. It would behoove you to talk about your offer, rather than your demand. The price for helping a prince that I disagree with ideologically is rather high, Your Highness."

The Martial Prince stared at Rui with a surprised expression. "Senior Quarrier, I don't think any other Martial Senior would have dared to utter those words to me. I am the seventy-

second prince of the Kandrian Empire. I am the sole prince who joined the Martial Union and harnessed its power and is the sole Martial Artist prince at the moment. I am one of the seven candidates to become Emperor."

"And I am the only one who can elevate you to the Squire Realm," Rui replied calmly.

The air grew taut being wrung by the tension that brewed between the two figures.

However, the prince did not retort.

He did not dare to.

The sound of his silence elicited a small smile to crack at the edge of Rui's mouth.

'He's more desperate to reach the Squire Realm than he lets on.'

Rui had increasingly begun suspecting this ever since the conversation had begun. The Martial Prince had done a good job hiding it at the start, but he had let slip when he intuitively realized Rui had a solution. Displaying the direness of one's need was never a good idea since it strengthened Rui's position in their negotiations.

Rui didn't need anything from him.

Ordinarily, Rui would be afraid of the sheer amount of power that the prince had accumulated. Martial Seniors, Martial Masters, and even a Martial Sage.

Yet Rui's calculations had accounted for those.

Chapter 1604: Shocking Demands

While Prince Raijun had earned the political support of a solid chunk of the Martial Union, he did not own that power. That power had more of an ownership over him than he did over it.

'Your status as a prince does not hold nearly as much weight amongst Martial Artists of the Martial Union as it does elsewhere.' Rui mused. 'The only reason they're supporting you is because only those with Royal blood can ascend the throne.'

In other words, Prince Raijun was not a leader so much as a front. While he had undoubtedly displayed political acumen qualities in lobbying for as many Martial Artists to join his faction. What he was essentially doing was selling himself as an opportunity for the Martial Union to gain the throne.

In other words, for all matters not relating to the throne, the Martial Union did not care about Prince Raijun.

This included his personal ambition as a Martial Apprentice to reach the Squire Realm. The Martial Supremacist faction in particular would never choose that personal ambition over Rui.

Rui knew that.

He knew that the Martial Supremacists were extremely favorable to him. Commissioner Derun of the faction, who sent him to Vilun Island, was extremely pleased with his performance back then. On top of that, the Martial Supremacist Faction undoubtedly fell in love with the Hungry Pain technique that he supplied them.

Furthermore, they were undoubtedly strong supporters of Rui spreading his Martial Art and creating his own sect. Something that the prince himself, Headmaster Aronian, the various Martial Sects, and the Minister of Martial Art had all personally requested or suggested Rui do.

In comparison, Prince Raijun's personal ambitions as a Martial Artist did not matter nearly as much to them compared to the most prodigious Martial Senior in history. He had already earned their support as an Apprentice, they themselves didn't gain much by him becoming a Squire. The prince himself was the one who gained the most by becoming a Squire.

The final reason Rui was confident was that Martial Artists believed in Martial power. Martial power had become an integral part of their identity, after all. It was almost impossible for Martial Artists to respect and value a Martial Apprentice more than a Martial Senior, especially one like Rui.

Rui had keenly understood all these factors and had realized a single thing.

The Martial Union would not help Prince Raijun bully Rui for his personal aspirations. Prince Raijun couldn't command them to do so either, he had not earned their loyalty, only their incentivized and calculated support.

He may be the Martial Prince, but Rui was the Martial Golden Boy of the Kandrian Empire and the Martial Union.

This was further supported by the fact that his personal bodyguards were those supplied by the state, and not by the Martial Union. It was subtle, but Rui's sharp insight detected the distance between him and his faction.

It became increasingly clear to Rui that although the Martial Prince had the highest amount of Martial capital, he had the least amount of control over his faction than any other prince or princess, most likely.

This was a reality that even the prince was very well aware of and had been trying to hide, but alas, Rui had discovered the truth nonetheless.

If Prince Raijun wanted Rui's help, he was going to have to use the carrot, since the stick would refuse to help him in this regard.

"Like I said," The Prince's voice had gained an edge of steel. "Name your price."

Rui smiled.

It had been a bit spontaneous, but everything had gone according to his plan. No other Martial Senior would have been able to get away with what Rui had just pulled off.

"I want ten times the amount of funds I'm getting," Rui calmly replied. "In return, I'll guarantee your breakthrough to the Squire Realm."

The Prince's eyes widened. "That's an enormous sum. I'm already supplying you close to a billion per annum!"

"I said I would guarantee you achieving Squire candidacy," Rui replied with a composed tone. "What's more important, the sheer amount of wealth that you undoubtedly have to spare as a member of the Royal Family or your breakthrough to the Squire Realm?"

"How can you possibly guarantee that?" The prince furrowed his eyebrows.

"It's because of your dedication and commitment to your Martial Art, Your Highness," Rui replied. "While unrefined due to a lack of experience, your Martial Art is overflowing with individuality. It shows that you have worked tirelessly on your Martial Art, imbuing it with your individuality, even if unrefined. Had you refined your individuality with experience, then you would have become a Martial Squire a long ago. I'm just getting rid of the final obstacle holding you back. It is your effort that has gotten you this far, Your Highness."

Rui smiled, lighting up the atmosphere a little.

"Stand Proud. You are strong."

The Martial Prince's eyes widened as Rui validated the years of futile effort that he put in. Effort that he had thought was in vain.

Rui had shown him the truth.

It wasn't in vain.

His labor would yield fruit.

Fruit that Rui Quarrier would personally deliver to him.

He pushed down the elation that emerged from deep within. The elation that threatened to overwhelm him with emotion. Yet he was far too dignified as a prince to let it overwhelm him in the presence of other people.

"If you can live up to your words, then I will give you what you seek," The Martial Prince promised.

"That isn't all that I want. That's just the beginning," Rui replied.

The Martial Prince frowned. Money was easy, even if this amount was particularly a lot. However, he could handle the money, he wasn't sure what else Rui wanted from him.

"Once you become a Martial Squire. I'm sure you're going to work hard to lobby support and influence away from your competitors. I'm sure you'll leverage the additional support you get to engage in a lot of sabotage, both active, covert, and everything in between." Rui replied. "What I want is for you to exclude the Sea Princess and the People's Prince from your counter-campaigning and sabotage operations."

Prince Rajun's eyes widened. "What?!"

Chapter 1605: Alternatives

The air grew tumultuous and uncertain. The two Martial Masters narrowed their eyes at Rui.

Yet he didn't so much as budge or twitch.

Of course, he felt shivers crawling up his skin.

He felt chills going down his spine.

But he maintained an impeccably calm demeanor despite the pressure that they exerted on him.

Naturally, Prince Raijun stared at him in disbelief.

His eyes sharpened. "Did you just misspeak? Or did I mishear you? Maybe I should get my ears checked."

Rui simply stared at him impassively. He had conveyed his demand, and he knew how outrageous it was. It was, frankly, an absurd demand.

How could he possibly demand Prince Raijun to stop fighting against Prince Ranea and Prince Raul for the throne?

"Senior Quarrier," The prince's demeanor grew intense. A single question escaped his mouth.

"Do you understand the gravity of the demand that you have made?"

His friendly facade disappeared. His demeanor and posture changed, revealing an aristocratic and royal bearing. One that came with being part of one of the most powerful families in East Panama. Untold wealth was at his disposal.

Immense Martial Power thrust him forward towards the throne.

Yet Rui didn't back down.

"I made my conditions clear, Your Highness," He bowed his head lightly. "You can accept them...or refuse them. The choice is yours."

"You want me to cease offensive campaigning measures against Ranea and Raul?" The prince growled. "That's patently absurd!"

"Not nearly as absurd as the ability to refine Martial Art for another person," Rui replied calmly. "That is the service that I am offering at the moment."

"Even still," The Martial Prince narrowed his eyes. "How can you demand me to cease offensive campaigning measures against two of my prime competitors?! We aren't playing a card game, we're fighting for ultimate authority over a powerhouse Sage-level nation!"

"I didn't demand it," Rui replied calmly. "You don't have to take the deal. But what is non-negotiable is that this is the deal. If you don't like it then..."

Rui shrugged. "We can go our separate ways. That's fine by me as well. But...you won't ever be able to become a Martial Squire."

"I don't necessarily have to rely on you," Prince Raijun remarked. "Now that I have been enlightened on the problem, I can rely on other methods. Surely a powerful mind Martial Master should be able to rely on some hypnosis to compensate for experience."

"Hypnosis targets the subconscious mind, not the conscious mind," Rui replied. "It cannot replicate the state of both the conscious and the subconscious mind simultaneously in a particular circumstance. It

suffers the same problem as exposing yourself to bloodlust. It cannot change your conscious mind without manipulating your memories."

"Then altering memories is a viable solution?" Prince Raijun.

"It is," Rui confirmed. "However, the difficulty of altering your memories to believe that your life is in danger is extremely high. And the reason for that is because you have many memories to believe that you are not in danger."

Rui raised a finger. "First, you are a Royal Prince. This memory alone severely contradicts the idea that you would be in danger because there are very few forces in the world that can threaten you since you are protected by Martial Masters. Any threat that can bypass your security should easily be strong enough to kill you too, so how would your mind address this discrepancy?"

The Martial Prince narrowed his eyes as he considered the issues that Rui brought up. "In general, there are huge contradictions with you being able to fight off something that even managed to reach a position where it could threaten your life in a fair fight that you somehow have a chance of winning. Unless you are unintelligent, your mind will notice the discrepancies across its memories."

"Are the discrepancies such a problem so long as I actually fight thinking my life is at threat?" Prince Raijun asked with a serious tone.

"The mind is more delicate than you can imagine, Your Highness," Rui replied. "Conflicting core memories with experience can cause deep psychological stress and post-traumatic stress disorders," Rui replied. "Your memories are a crystallization of who you are. They are also built upon one another, the more you take away, the more you lose sight of who you are. On top of that, one's Martial drive emerges from memories, which means that it is liable to be impacted for the duration of the memory loss."

That stirred Prince Raijun, putting an end to his enthusiasm for mind manipulation solutions. The fact that none of his Martial Masters had rebuked Rui was proof that he was not uttering unsubstantiated falsehoods.

"What about a Martial Sage?" Prince Raijun asked with a pointed look. "The Kandrian Empire has a mind Martial Sage. What if I enlist Her Excellency Sage Farana's services for my training? Surely she will be able to handle my memory more delicately."

Rui shrugged. "I don't know. But you can give it a try if you want."

Prince Raijun's expression flickered with a hint of surprise. "You're not going to try and convince me otherwise?"

Rui shrugged nonchalantly. "Why would I? If everything works out, good for you. I highly doubt it will though."

"Why is that?"

"Because mind Martial Artists understand the nature of their field the least out of any and all Martial Artists, Your Highness," Rui heaved a sigh. "The human mind is far and away the single most inscrutable and esoteric phenomenon and existence in the entire universe. They don't understand the mind as well offensive Martial Artists understand offense, or defensive Martial Artists; defense, or maneuvering Martial Artists; maneuvering. To them, the mind is a black box, and they possess some understanding of its mechanisms through which they can tinker around with it to produce some potent effects that could be applied in combat. I would not trust anybody to mess with my mind to such an extent, even if I believed in their intentions, which... can you?"

That was a definite concern to Prince Raijun.

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Chapter 1606: Additional Considerations

"From what I understand, Her Excellency is not a part of your faction," Rui replied. "Even if she was, you wouldn't trust her with your memories if you had any sense. Martial Sages possess the sheer power to get away with anything short of high treason against the Royal Emperor himself. Even if she wipes your

memories and turns you into a vegetable, she will most likely not face too much trouble. She is infinitely more valuable to the nation than you are."

His words cut sharp, but they were true. There was absolutely nothing that Prince Raijun could do for or against a Martial Sage that didn't align with his ideals.

The prince heaved a sigh as he fell deep into thought.

He did not like his current position.

Rui had exploited the chinks in his armor, such as his lack of loyalty from his faction, to get away with making absurd demands that he could not dismiss. He had also cleverly leveraged his sheer value to the Martial Union, and how much the organization clearly adored Rui despite the fact that he did not choose to become an internal member and join their corps.

He would not be able to convince the Surgeon or any other Martial Master in his political faction to try and pressure Rui into helping him refine his Martial Art. They would straight up refuse.

They both knew that.

If Prince Raijun tried bullying Rui with a few Martial Artists of his own then...

'You'll lose support from the Martial Union. You managed to reel in the Martial Supremacist Faction because you espoused their ideals and agreed to elevate Martial Artists to the head of the nation,' Rui mused inwardly. 'Once they find out that you used your authority to suppress a Martial Artist two Realms above you, then everything will come into question.'

That was why Prince Raijun, despite being shocked by Rui's demand, had been careful not to antagonize Rui in an attempt to try and squeeze his services out of him.

Everything thus far has gone according to Rui's plan.

"I don't see why you're hesitating, Your Highness," Rui shrugged. "Are you perhaps lacking in confidence in your ability to surpass His Highness Prince Raul and Her Highness Princess Ranea without sabotage and counter-operations?"

The Martial Prince simply stared at Rui imperiously. "They are an integral part of any campaign. Perhaps you do not realize the magnitude of what you are demanding in return. Crippling me of an essential tool in Kandrian Throne War is debilitating."

"But is it debilitating enough to overwhelm the additional surge in support that you will gain from the Martial Union by becoming a Martial Squire?" Rui smiled. "Just imagine Your Highness. You will have proved all your naysayers wrong. You will have proved that you are indeed a fine Martial Artist who still pursues his Martial Path. You will have proven that you are worthy of greater support."

There was the hook. Try as he might, the Martial Prince was unable to deny the sheer attraction of Rui's proposal. Everything that Rui had just outlined was like a dream come true to him. It was extremely attractive and alluring to him.

He breathed deeply, exhaling heavily before shaking his head lightly. "Your proposal crosses many lines. It's an outrageous demand. However...the reward is just that alluring, assuming you are accurate about your capabilities. My Martial Masters have yet to verify that."

Rui shrugged. "I don't mind making some demonstrations. However, you haven't gotten to the point yet, Your Highness. What will you do if I am indeed able to what I say?"

The Martial Prince stared at Rui for several seconds, before shaking his head. "I cannot give you an answer here and now. You are asking for far too much for me to make a decision right away, there are far too many patrons who have a stake in my campaign for me to make such a decision lightly. I will have to take into consideration everything that you have said and consult with various experts and stakeholders before I make a decision."

Rui smiled lightly. This was the best response that he could hope for at the moment. It was impossible for Prince Raijun to rely on his extensive faction and administration to help him come to a decision regarding this matter.

"Do you support Ranea and Raul's visions for the future?" Prince Raijun asked, narrowing his eyes. Rui heaved a sigh. "Not as much as you'd think. I just think their philosophy of them is by far the most palatable among all. That's not to say that it's perfect, but I don't find them disagreeable. However, I have not yet met either of them, let alone thrown my support behind them."

Then again, he would be meeting Princess Ranea soon enough.

"You are bolder than I ever imagined, Senior Quarrier," Prince Raijun remarked with a hint of grudging admiration. "I would have never imagined that our first training session would have unfolded in this manner."

"Neither did I, Your Highness," Rui smirked. "But we can only play the cards we have been dealt. That is all I did."

"You could have just agreed to make me a Martial Squire in exchange for normal rewards." Prince Raijun remarked. "Wealth, resources, territory, resources, and information. You could have capitalized on this opportunity to get as much of those as you wished. Yet you wish to cripple some of my tools in the Kandrian Throne War."

"Well, I did ask for wealth," Rui replied. "However, if you must know, it's because the outcome of the Kandrian Throne War is important to me. I took this opportunity to influence it."

"If you find the Martial Supremacist philosophy that disagreeable, then why even offer to help me?" The Prince asked, probing Rui's philosophy. "You would be better off simply paying the expensive severance pay and breaking away quietly."

"To protect my long-term personal interests, Your Highness" Rui replied with a wry smile. "The best way to avoid irking the non-Martial power bloc of your faction is to engage in a transaction where they gain what they want. I'm not interested in making a powerful enemy after being exiled due to being making powerful enemies. That is why I have chosen to avoid antagonizing you by refusing you, and have decided to pursue cooperation instead. Thus I truly do hope we can engage in a transaction, Your Highness, for both our sakes."

Rui found it truly regrettable that he was unable to hide the fact that he could fix the Martial Prince's problems. But when the cat came out of the bag, he swiftly came to a decision to offer some means of cooperation instead of refusing to cooperate.

This was because he truly did not want to earn the enmity of an entire faction by operating in bad faith.

After all, he had promised that he would do his reasonable best to help the prince. The Martial Prince had acted in good faith this entire time, and it was Rui who went against the spirit of their deal.

Breaking out of their deal with the severance pay would mean breaking ties with the Raijun Faction on bad terms. That was a level of pressure that he could not handle even as a high-grade Martial Senior. Had he been a Martial Master, he would have been able to get away with it, but alas, he was not.

That was why, in fear of pissing off many wealthy patrons, Martial Masters, and even a Sage, he ultimately decided to cooperate. The Kandrian Throne War was important, but not worth pissing off people astronomically more powerful than him.

Of course, the Martial Union was very pleased with Rui at the moment and that included the Martial Supremacist Faction, so he didn't think they would instantly become hostile to him., but it would undoubtedly sour his relations with the Martial Union. He also needed a lot of support to be inducted into the Fiscal Committee as a constituent.

Prince Raijun was the Martial Union's ticket to the throne, or a good chunk of the Martial Union, anyway. Rui essentially sabotaging Prince Raijun would not fly over well with a lot of people.

Such was the nature of the dynamics. On one hand, the Martial Union would never allow an outsider, who too of royal blood, to bully Rui. On the other hand, the Martial Union would not be pleased if Rui refused to give them the key to winning the Cold War.

Both Prince Raijun and Rui were smaller than the Martial Union and the Martial Supremacist Faction in this case.

That was why Rui wisely left open a path forward to cooperation.

Furthermore, in this path, he still left some hope for Prince Raul and Ranea to win, since he would be taking away crucial methods for Prince Raul to push back against those two competitors. It was still possible for them to win the Kandrian Throne War.

Furthermore, this deal also reduced the probability that the remaining four princes and princesses; the Underworld Prince, the Corporate Princess, the Military Prince, and the Communist Princess, would succeed.

This was because Prince Raul would use the resources spared by abstaining against the People's Prince and the Sea Princess against the remaining four.

Thus, if Prince Raijun accepted Rui's proposal, then the princes and princesses with the highest probability of victory were Prince Raijun himself, Prince Raul, and Princess Ranea.

Only one of those three was an undesirable candidate as far as Rui was concerned.

He shrugged inwardly. This was the best he could do with the cards that he had been dealt at that point in time.

The first training session between the two of them had the potential to become historic. If Prince Raijun accepted Rui's deal, then he would become a Martial Squire, which could ultimately prove to be the deciding element in the Kandrian Throne War.

It was a heavy burden, but alas, this was the consequence of having extraordinary capabilities. Rui had even fully processed the ramifications of being known to refine individuality.

'Oh well, they should understand that this is something that can't be done for everybody,' Rui heaved a sigh.

He could do it for a Martial Apprentice, but it became increasingly difficult the more experienced a Martial Artist was and the higher their Realm was. It was basically impossible for him to do it for most Martial Seniors.

Perhaps only Ieyasu would be capable of that, but he didn't possess Rui's keen ability to process to identify micro-flaws.

"One last thing," Prince Raijun had told Rui before the training session ended. "I'm going to require you to prove your words. If you cannot do it here and now, then I'll assume you have been deceiving me this entire time."

"Rest assured I have not," Rui heaved a troubled sigh. "Come, allow me to demonstrate."

The two of them got onto the training ground once more. Thankfully, Rui had seen more than enough to have created a predictive model.

They took identical stances, standing opposite each other.

What followed stunned not just the Martial Prince, but also the Martial Masters behind him.

Rui had... become the prince. Every movement, every attack, every maneuver, gesture, and even twitch of movement had become identical.

Even his expressions matched that of the prince.

It was like he was fighting a mirror image of himself.

A stronger and more reined mirror image of himself.

THUD!

Rui flipped the Martial Prince over his shoulder, slamming him onto the ground.

WHOOSH!

His fist stopped centimeters away from the man's stunned face.

"That should prove my words," Rui replied calmly. "I reduced reaction time to match yours, as well as my other physical parameters. Aside from basic modifications to your movements to account for the different bodies, I have also corrected almost all of the micro-flaws in your style, and this is the outcome."

Rui had completely demolished him with the same techniques and movements.

"...Is this how unrefined I am?" The prince murmured with shock.

"Indeed," Rui replied with a composed tone. "I believe there should be no problems with the credibility of my claims."

He glanced at the two Martial Masters who had been observing their spar attentively. They didn't respond to him, but their silence was a good admission of their approval.

"And so...that leaves my decision," Prince Raijun murmured as he got up, staring deep into Rui's eyes. "And...this will be the means through which you refine my Martial Art for me?"

"Yes," Rui replied calmly.

"And...you're confident it will work?"

"Quite."

Chapter 1608: Reward Reaping

Rui departed from the Mantian Royal Manor shortly after as Prince Raijun ended their session, promising a response at a later date. He had, once again, declined the offer to be transported home. He heaved a sigh as a rush of thoughts flew through his head. He had many considerations in mind.

A complex analysis of factors had gone into his decision to offer help to Prince Raijun at the cost of not countering or sabotaging Prince Ranea and Prince Raul. It wasn't just because he did not dislike their political inclinations. He also had self-preserving reasons to do so.

For one, he knew the Beggar's Sect was in favor of Prince Raul. He was essentially taking some measures to appease them by making a deal that was more favorable to Prince Raul than the rest of them.

He was keenly aware of the fact that Alice and Farion were a part of the Beggar's Sect. He also knew what this meant. While Alice and Farion shared a heartwarming story of how the Beggar's Sect had helped them in a time of need. They didn't possess the political acumen to understand that they themselves were a subtle and implicit message from the Beggar's Sect to Rui.

They were informing Rui to not mess with them, for they had his family. There was no reason for them to reveal the fact that Alice and Farion had joined the Beggar's Sect. The Beggar's Sect's greatest strength was that nobody knew who was a Beggar and who wasn't. Yet despite their anonymity and invisibility being their strength, they had still chosen to divulge the fact that.

It was quite unpleasant, but he didn't have the power to fight off the Beggar's Sect. On top of that, he didn't have the right to tell Alice and Farion to leave the sect. And finally, he had to admit that the fact that the sect had indeed done a lot of good.

To a certain extent, he was repaying the debt that he had to them by carving out a deal that was more favorable to Prince Raijun. "Huff..." Rui heaved a sigh. "Whatever, I've done what I can. It's time I focus on my own matters."

He put away the thoughts surrounding the Kandrian Throne War and thought about the path forward for him. It had been two weeks since he returned and he was ready to actively begin taking the next few steps forward.

He had several priorities over the next few days.

Rui curled his mouth in disgust as he read through the description. The potion was made from the extracted semen of a male adamantiger, a species of monster big cats that was known for being

extremely hard to kill. It granted the subject immense physical durability, making their flesh extremely tough and impervious.

Even if he put aside his feeling about the ingredients of the potion, he wasn't too interested in potions that empowered a single parameter alone. While that worked for specialized Martial Artists, it did not work for him, a dynamic all-rounder. He preferred something that would relatively benefit his entire Martial Art.

Unfortunately for Rui, that disqualified most body-augmentation options that were available for him to him as a reward.

[Goliathan Flame Pill]

A pill that imbued the power of 'fire' within the muscles of the subject, making them stronger. It was such an unscientific explanation that he didn't even know what to make of it.

[Skyfall Crystal Treatment]

An exposure treatment to a substance found in a particularly dangerous zone in the Beast Domain known as the Raging Rain Zone, a zone that was endlessly bombarded with meteorites from outer space continuously forever for reasons that were unknown. It empowered speed and agility.

Unfortunately, the more well-balanced ones were much rarer compared to the specialized ones, and they weren't nearly as alluring. It made sense that a perfectly balanced treatment was much more unlikely than a treatment that had some imbalance.

It was merely a balance of probability, there were more possible outcomes that were imbalanced than balanced. Rui was faced with difficult choices.

Chapter 1609: Choice

The all-rounder body-augmentations did not sound nearly as impressive as some of the more focused ones precisely because of there was only one possibility of stable configuration of empowerment.

[General Augmentation Pill]

Augments all parameters of the body to a modest degree.

[Base Empowerment Potion]

Also augmented all parameters of the body to a modest degree.

Of course Rui understood why. The magnitude of the empowerment could not be the same as some of the other potions because it was spread out across the entire physiology, or more so than the specialized body augmentation treatments that needed to empower a portion of the body.

It certainly wasn't bad and would undoubtedly culminate in combat to make a substantial difference, but at the same time, Rui was rather displeased with both the lacking potency and flexibility of the general augmentation. Not all the available augmentations were lacking in potency and flexibility.

Rui glanced at the Roaring Dragon Blood Potion. This potion would empower his breathing, allowing him to exert greater force with his breathing. This was a potion that empowered the diaphragm of his body in general.

If he took this potion, he would be able to grow significantly more power than he already was, but he would also be able to exert that power in a power that was more flexible.

On top of that, from his understanding, domain techniques made use of breathing techniques more often than not. Rui quickly made a choice. "I'll go for this one," Rui pointed at a Roaring Dragon Blood Potion, turning to the woman seated opposite him.

He was seated in an office of an executive that was personally handling his needs. At the Senior Realm, each Senior was worth individualized attention, especially one such as Rui.

"Yes, but that's not what I wanted to speak about," Julian heaved a sigh. "You remember those topics that you asked me to open research projects on?"

"Right," Rui recalled the alibi that he had Julian prepare for so that he could shift credibility for the basis of the Hungry Pain technique.

"Well, a certain Doctor Garnen has made several donations to the projects and I have received several grants from the Martial Union randomly out of nowhere," Julian threw pointed look at Rui. "Even the dullest of minds would be able to deduce that this because of you."

Rui laughed. "Doctor Garnen eh? He was the most curious to meet the person that I credited the Hungry Pain technique to. He and the Martial Union must have deduced that it's you, just as planned"

"What?"

"Don't worry about it," Rui replied, smiling. "The Martial Union will probably make several offers to you to join their research and development department, feel free to look them over."

Julian heaved a tired sigh. "I wish you wouldn't involve me in your mischief. What are you up to this time?"

"Don't worry about it," Rui laughed. "Just make sure you exploit those fools. Make sure to squeeze them for everything they have."

Julian only grew more troubled at the sight of Rui indulging his amusement. Rui on the other hand was glad that everybody had fallen for his trap. He had given the impression that the theoretical foundation, from which Rui gained the understanding needed to then create the Hungry Pain technique, came from Julian.

As he expected, they had concluded that Julian was likely this highly esteemed person that Rui had referred to in his presentation of the Hungry Pain technique. That was why they were undoubtedly eager to build a working relationship with him to eventually bring him into the Martial Union.

"Have fun, and keep dazzling them with your brilliance, it is crucial that they remain fallen for it," Rui patted his brother on his shoulder.

Julian felt a headache coming up at those words.

Chapter 1610: Breathing Granny

The executive wasn't kidding when she said that the Martial Union would link him up with a Martial Artist user of the Hungry Pain technique.

However, he had expected that he would be referred to a Martial Senior.

Instead, he received an invitation from a Martial Master.

Master Vericita Nepomniachtchi, also known as the Breathing Sovereign was a high-grade Martial Master who had lived for four centuries. She was as old as the Kandrian Empire and was born just one century into the Age of Martial Art.

She was easily the oldest Martial Artist human being that Rui would have met by now. This Martial Master had also consumed the Roaring Dragon Blood Potion that Rui had chosen. She would be the Martial Master who would be informing Rui about the experiences of the Roaring Dragon Blood Potion.

Rui raised an eyebrow.

Would an esteemed and elder Martial Master serve as a consultant for something as trivial as the effects of a Roaring Dragon Blood Potion?

Rui didn't think so. 'Well, we'll see. Speaking with Martial Masters is only fruitful, making I can have her spend some time helping me with breathing techniques with the hundred hours that I have purchased.'

The meeting was scheduled for the next day without any delay. He quickly set out the next morning, heading to the town of Vrexin on the other side of the nation. The climate noticeably grew warmer towards the south. The Kandrian Empire was large enough that the climate could entirely change due to the starkly differing distance from the poles.

By the time he reached the town of Vrexin, he was even lightly sweating.

It wasn't long before he found the establishment that he was looking for.

[Breathing Sect]

A large board flashily announced the name of the organization that the walled Martial complex belonged to.

"Figured," Rui heaved a sigh, experiencing déjà vu. He figured that that wouldn't be the last time that he would be invited by a Martial Sect personally. The guards quickly let him in where two maids awaited him, bowing to him.

"Senior Quarrier, welcome to the Breathing Sect. Her Mastery awaits you eagerly. Please let us guide you to her."

The Breathing Sect was a lot different from Ranging Sect. The Ranging Sect inherently required space and room to accommodate and make enough space for the many training long-range Martial Artists of the Empire.

The Breathing Sect, on the other hand, did not require that much room inherently. The place was filled with meditating Martial artists and aspiring Martial Artists. Their breathing was gentle yet controlled.

It painted a picture of serenity.

Rui had already noticed the stark lack of sound or noise in the Martial Sect. Even the sounds produced by his footsteps were quite muffled. It appeared that the entire premises were sound-dampened to create an environment that was easier to focus in.

Eventually, he was led into a large luscious garden deep in the sect.

A single elderly woman was seated on the grass, cross-legged with her hands collected in her lap.

Yet it was her breathing that drew his attention.

There was something particularly eye-drawing about it.

It took a moment to realize what it was.

It wasn't so much as the breathing itself so much as what it did to everything around it.

His vision distorted every time she inhaled and exhaled.

Light itself was being warped with every breath she took.

His eyes widened as he felt the very skies respond to her deep breathing, tilting and gently rocking by the sheer weight of her relaxed breathing.

"You've come..." Her soft elderly voice rippled through the air so smoothly that he could have sworn her voice had directly materialized inside his mind. "Child of the Void."

A soft and serene smile slowly bloomed on her face as she slowly opened her eyes.

"Master Vericita," Rui bowed with respect, clasping his palm on his fist.

"You may dispense with formality if you so please, young man," She informed him, smiling softly.
"Come. Sit before me."

She turned to the maids that remained bowed behind him. "Prepare some tea for our guest."

"Yes, Your Master,"

She turned to Rui with a soft smile, meeting his gaze. "I've been waiting a long time to meet you for a long time, my child. I am pleased that our paths have finally crossed. It seems that you have understood the importance of breathing well."

"I have, Master," Rui replied politely. "Much of my Martial Art relies on breathing techniques."

"Such is the case for nearly every other Martial Artist," She remarked. "Breathing is not just fundamental to Martial Art, it is fundamental to an exertion of self, Martial or otherwise. It is fundamental to life itself. Life breathes, one way or another, it needs to. What do you think, Rui Quarrier?"

"I am inclined to agree, Master," Rui earnestly replied. "Breathing is extremely fundamental to Martial Art."

"Mmmm..." She nodded, smiling with appreciation. "And yet despite that, not nearly as many are as understanding of this truth as you are. Despite being so fundamental to Martial Art, it is denied its true status as an official fundamental field of Martial Art. Tell me, Rui Quarrier. What do you make of that?"

That was an abrupt segway. A more refined conversationalist or wordsmith would have found a smoother manner to channel the conversation in the direction they wanted. But such a direct approach did not leave any room to avoid the topic

Rui considered her words with a steady expression. While her voice was soft, her words were not lacking in controversy.

There were three officially recognized fundamental domains of Martial Art and combat as recognized by the Martial Union and the Panamic Martial Federation.

Offense, defense, and maneuvering. A battle could not be won without some form of offense. A battle couldn't be lost without some basic form of defense. A battle could not move forward if the combatants didn't.

With these rationales, offense, defense, and maneuvering were crowned as the holy trinity of combat, the three fundamental domains or fields of combat.

Not even two minutes had passed since they began conversing but this deceptively-soft and gentle granny had already brought up a controversial topic. Her words indicated that she firmly believed that breathing was as fundamental to combat as offense, defense, and maneuvering, and deserved to be crowned alongside them as a foundational field of combat.

But what did this have to do with Rui?