

Martial Unity 1651

Chapter 1651: Reunion

One day, news broke out in the Kandrian Empire about the birth of yet another prodigiously young Martial Senior. Squire Kane had returned from the Beast Domain as a Martial Senior after just three months of subjecting himself to the tribulations of the Beast Domain.

The disowned heir of the Arrancar Family had returned a Martial Senior. Many wondered what the Arrancar Family was going to do now that it had become apparent that they had the most to lose when Kane split from them.

With the appearance of yet another prodigiously young Senior who had shattered the previous record for the youngest Senior before Rui, the Kandrian Empire seemed to rank number one when it came to harnessing talent and actualizing it.

It was a source of prestige for the entire nation and painted a bright picture for the future.

Kane, however, avoided everything as he went straight to Rui, looking for him.

"Rui!" He called out when he reached the orphanage.

Rui turned, glancing at Kane's sky-walking and Martial Hearted figure.

He had already prepared a Mind Mask for some mental conditioning.

"Kane? You broke through to the Senior Realm!" He exclaimed with what seemed like genuine ecstasy. "Congratulations!"

"Hehehe, I almost died, though," Kane replied, grinning.

The two of them did their best to play the act.

"How was the Beast Domain?" Rui asked curiously as he invited the young man into the orphanage.

"It was something else..." Kane shook his head. "It makes you wonder if you're even in the same world anymore, whether you were mysteriously transported to an alien world."

Rui nodded; he had gotten the same feeling when he navigated through the Great Forest of Hypnonarak.

"There were tons of dangers hidden throughout the entire zone that I was in," Kane remarked. "This one time..."

He narrated the story of how he went through the Beast Domain.

This part of the story was rather genuine. Kane had subjected himself to many hardships since he was not allowed to use his Martial Heart until his fake breakthrough to the Senior Realm.

"I'm telling you, man," Kane shook his head, heaving a sigh. "Them Beast Domain monsters of a different breed, literally. They're monsters through and through. They're vicious, but many of them are intelligent as well, not just mindless like the monsters of the Shionel Dungeon."

Rui's curiosity peaked at Kane's tales. He had yet to plunge into the Beast Domain due to one reason or another his entire life. However, now he had reached a stage in his life where he could do whatever he wanted for the most part; he didn't have to worry about a psycho chairman gunning after his life. He had also sealed off the crazy religious Master in an expensive wide information blackout.

"If you're planning to go into the Beast Domain, you definitely need to be prepared, Rui," Kane warned him. "Don't assume you'll be fine just because you're strong. Your general ability to survive in the Beast Domain needs to be high. There are weak creatures in the beast domain that survive long because they have really good survival skills or abilities. There are also powerful creatures that get hunted because they draw more attention than they can handle. It's a whole other world there. I fully understand why human civilization doesn't just conquer the beast domain."

Rui nodded. Especially now that he had learned that the thirteen Martial Transcendents of human civilization did not act. Conquering the Beast Domain had become a much more challenging ambition for humanity.

Of course, the many Martial Sages scattered across human civilization together were an awe-inspiring force, but Rui didn't know if they were enough to definitively conquer the Beast Domain. It covered a substantial chunk of the continent at its center, meaning the sheer amount of area that it covered was extremely high.

On top of that, the Beast Domain may be much smaller than human civilization, but it was more densely packed with powerful creatures than humanity was.

It made Rui wonder how humanity even came to conquer as much of the continent as it already had.

"I probably won't head out to the Beast Domain immediately, though it is an agenda on my mind," Rui remarked, recalling primordial seed. "Still, I probably will take my time to prepare for it when I do head out. I have no intention of dying there."

"Good," Kane nodded. "So, what have you been up to for the past three months?"

"Oh, mostly training, but before that..." Rui heaved a sigh, narrating the tale of everything that happened since then.

"Wow," Kane stared at him, stunned. "You've already met with and spoken to three of the so-called seven prime princes and princesses? That's crazy!"

"Is it?" Rui heaved a tired sigh. "It's nothing but trouble, honestly."

"How can you even say that?" Kane stared at him skeptically. "It shows just how valued you are."

"Hah, you'll find out just how troublesome it is," Rui smirked, thinking about Princess Rafia. "Though you might just enjoy it. At the cost of your relationship with Fae."

"What is that supposed to mean?" Kane furrowed his eyebrow.

"Hehehe, you'll find out."

"Don't mess me with man, spit it out."

"Make me."

"..."

The two of them bantered for quite some time, catching up as Rui told him about everything he had been focusing on.

"Domain techniques, huh?" Kane scratched his head. "Never heard of them. They sound quite niche."

"They are," Rui replied. "The sole Martial Master with a domain Martial Art doesn't care to form a sect to spread it. But I have been focusing on adding it to my Martial Art. I have a pretty solid affinity with it and have been working on several interesting projects that will elevate my Martial Art to a higher level as far as adaptive evolution goes."

"Wow..." Kane stared at him with raised eyebrows. "I'm guessing I should focus on getting stronger too."

"What you need is more experience using the Martial Heart," Rui replied. "I would suggest you spar with different kinds of Martial Artists and build a lot of experience."

Chapter 1652: Status Quo

Speaking to Kane was quite good; they went on to speak for a whole day, talking about a whole slew of topics. "So your Hungry Pain contribution was a whopping success," Kane remarked. "I can't believe you planned for that ten years ago when you gave it to us to create samples and evidence that the Martial Union could use to verify the effects of the technique. That's unbelievable!"

He marveled at Rui's foresight in and outside fights. "Yes, but it also had a lot of unintended consequences," Rui heaved a sigh. "For one, it came at a rather sensitive period, considering how groundbreaking it is. It has caused many waves and drawn a lot of attention."

Rui recalled what Master Krakule had told him about how the Hungry Pain technique benefited Prince Randal and the Hawk Faction the most. It was certainly something that he hadn't expected, largely because he was not aware of the internal political situation of the Kandrian Empire when he had given the technique to Commissioner Rez.

Though he wouldn't have changed his decision either way, he needed the funds to blackout Master Uma, and at the time, that was the best way he had.

"So that's about it for me. Nothing else has happened in the past three months. It has only been three months," Rui remarked.

"So you are planning on staying in the Kandrian Empire for now?"

"Yes, unless something drastically changes, forcing me to leave, I will definitely be sticking around in the empire. It doesn't feel like it, but it has only been four months since I came back home after Chairman Deacon passed away."

Rui carefully avoided self-reporting for fear of it being used against him.

"Good to hear. Then we'll get to hang out with each other like we used to," Kane nodded, smiling. "Yes, but I imagine you'll be a bit busy," Rui replied. "With what?"

"With other people," Rui replied. "You're the second youngest Martial Senior in history, Kane. You were known to be a generational prodigy even before that. A lot of people are interested in that kind of potential and talent. There's a good chance that you will be approached by Raijun Faction."

"I don't know enough about this shit to make a proper decision," Kane sighed. "I can help you out," Rui offered. "Though you might want to stay out of it altogether."

"Yeah, I'm probably going to do that," Kane replied. "I avoided this stuff back when I was a Squire. I also was never approached by anyone since I was only a Martial Squire. The only thing I was aware of was the fact that the Arrancar Family had sided with the Randal Faction."

Rui raised an eyebrow, stroking his scruffy chin. "Interesting. I suppose that makes sense."

The Hawk Faction was the warmongering faction among all the factions of the Kandrian Empire. It made sense that Sage Damian Arrancar was aligned with them, knowing his temperament.

"So he's a leader of the Fire Sect and of the Hawk Faction, that's truly curious," Rui remarked.

"You haven't decided which prince or princess to support, right?" Kane asked. "...I am hesitating between Prince Raul, the People's Prince, and Princess Ranea, the Princess of the Seas," Rui replied. "They sound the least disruptive, but I don't know enough. I only purchased basic information. It's also too important to rely solely on second-hand information when I have the option of speaking to them and verifying the truth myself."

He could only hope that those two were not extreme enough in their ideologies, but he wasn't sure. Generally, when people appealed to a specific power bloc, it was not unusual for their policies to be overwhelmingly in favor of that power bloc. "I am meeting Princess Ranea in a week," Rui replied. "She's hosting a small social convention on the unveiling of the first submarine of the Kandrian Empire."

"I see," Kane remarked. "What's a submarine?"

Rui explained the recent developments relating to the Princess of the Seas, explaining to him everything she strived for.

"Woah..." Kane murmured. "Turning the Kandrian Empire into a naval Empire? That sounds... rather drastic."

"It's better than most of the others that will result in war," Rui heaved a sigh. "Ideally, I'd rather a status quo be maintained. All these princes and princesses are too eager to dye the Kandrian Empire in their colors. There should be a lot of people who simply want to maintain the current status quo, but because

these princes and princesses are appealing to specific powers, their policies naturally are inclined to serve them."

There were probably a lot of people who for the Kandrian Empire to maintain its stable inertia. For a nation of its size and power, the Kandrian Empire was remarkably balanced compared to other Sage-level powerhouses.

The Shionel Confederation had gained two sages and was an absolute corporatocracy where merchants were essentially nobles. The Britannian Empire was often called an army with a nation rather than a nation with an army. The Sekigahara Confederate was barely considered a single nation as opposed to a bundled group of warring clans that constantly bickered and fought amongst each other. The Republic of Gorteau was known to be one of the most corrupt nations in East Kandria, with a democratic system that had been utterly sold to a deep state of several competing power blocs.

The delicate balance that the Kandrian Empire had was definitely precious; it was just a shame that these princes and princesses were not inclined to maintain the balance and inertia that made the Kandrian Empire one of the most desirable nations to live in East Kandria.

Rui heaved a sigh, shaking his head. "If I were a prince, I would form a faction that was centered around preserving and conserving the current balance of powers that exists within the Kandrian Empire. That is probably the only way another prince could compete with the seven prime princes and princesses of the Kandrian Empire."

Chapter 1653: Arrival

The two of them spoke together the entire day before eventually splitting paths. Kane was definitely going to grow quite busy with offers from various parties and entities in the Kandrian Empire. While Rui's refusal to accept such deals, to the point of not even being willing to shackle himself to a sect, was well-known around the nation, Kane was not nearly as closed off to accepting such offers from patrons.

He would definitely grow quite busy in the coming weeks. Of course, Rui didn't intend to intervene; they were both fully grown adults who could handle their own business. Rui was glad that he didn't hear any suspicions about him being related to Kane's breakthrough in the news when he occasionally interacted with members of the Martial Community that he was acquainted with.

Of course, it would be rather bizarre for anybody to suspect him, considering Kane broke through in the Beast Domain while Rui was clearly here in the Kandrian Empire the entire time.

In the meantime, he continued to work on the four domain technique projects that he had come up with since then. Each of them challenged him in unique ways as he indulged in the thrill of figuring out their challenges and hurdles.

As he worked on the necessary mechanisms and the technique framework and blueprint, he gained a better idea of what they would look like when he was done, as well as their potential impact on combat.

He was pleased to discover that investing his upgraded breathing power into domains was definitely worth the investment with the sheer ROI that he was getting.

There was no better way to apply his breathing towards adaptive evolution, generally speaking, than to employ it to bend heaven to antithetically counter his opponent. It was the best way to go even further down his Martial Path. The second best option was employing different breathing techniques to augment different parameters of the body, as Ian Nepomniachtchi did with Fire Breathing, Lightning Breathing, and Earth Breathing.

'Yet even those wouldn't allow me to adapt to my opponent as well as these domain techniques would, by the looks of it.'

Of course, there were no absolutes. There probably were a fair share of circumstances where the breathing options were more desirable. In such circumstances, he would naturally adapt and use what was most fit. Rui wasn't strictly in favor of always using domains or anything of that sort.

Regardless, he was convinced in his decision to master domain techniques; he was even convinced that the three projects would definitely be as successful as they were right now.

The only project he wasn't nearly as optimistic about was Project Reverse Prophet. The difficulty was even greater than he had feared.

Detecting all vectors with a domain was extremely difficult in and of itself. But processing them and then extrapolating the past based on that data through the laws of reality.

That was a feat that, for once, not even his powerful mind may be able to cope with. The sheer depth of the degree he would need to look into the past for the technique to be useful and practical was so high that he wasn't sure if he could do it even as he constructed the technique.

On top of that, this was a heavily thought-intensive process; he would not get smoother at it with muscle memory as he would with the other domains. He could only heave a sigh and hope that things worked out in his favor.

As he trained in the four domain techniques, a week passed. The day of the inauguration of the first submarine of the Kandrian Empire had arrived after several months of preparation. The event was much larger and much more formal than either of the previous gatherings that the other two princesses had invited him to.

For one, it wasn't simply just a faction meeting with a few potential members to join the faction; it was also an event to raise support for her new naval initiative.

Rui looked forward to meeting with Princess Ranea. In fact, he was quite eager. He needed to confirm that he had made the right choice when he gave her an advantage in his deal with Prince Raijun.

Come morning, he found himself engaging in yet another round of tiresome grooming with a scented bath his mother prepared for him, a clean shave, and combing his messy hair before finally donning the one and only custom-tailored formal Martial attire that he had.

He didn't really care to go for yet another horrific shopping spree with Alice.

It wasn't too long before he had sky-walked across Kandria, heading to the port town of Farund. Instantly, he could sense the difference in the energies in the air of the port town. The entire town had an electric air of excitement and enthusiasm. He could see decorations bearing Princess Ranea's personal crest, paying homage to her. The harbors had been docked with large ships as several waves more were incoming.

It wasn't surprising, given that the inauguration of the first submarine was supposed to be a town-wide event.

Master Ceeran had invited him prior to the inauguration ceremony since the two of them would be going together.

"Ah, you look rather distinguished, Rui," Master Ceeran smiled. "As do you, Master Ceeran."

"Are you ready?" Master Ceeran asked with a hint of eagerness. "I am looking forward to this new so-called submarine. I wonder how it works."

"I am more interested in speaking to Her Highness about her political ambitions," Rui replied.

Submarines in this world may have been truly novel, but it wasn't special to him. He was much more interested in getting a better personal impression of Her Highness. Mainly, this was probably going to be the first time that he would consider joining a faction or supporting a candidate for the ruler, depending on whether she was able to appeal to him with her political ambitions or not.

His mind was entirely focused on that, and that's why he didn't share Master Ceeran's curiosity about a vessel that could travel underwater.

"The entire town is in quite the mood, you see," Master Ceeran informed Rui with a smile. "As a port town, seeing a princess be so invested in the nation's seafaring and maritime sectors is incredibly rare and good since it is something that rarely happens."

Chapter 1654: Long Time

The two of them chatted some more about miscellaneous matters before it was eventually time to set out for the ceremony. They sky-walked, as did many other Martial Artists, avoiding the bustling crowds below them as they headed towards the large observing gallery that had been specifically constructed for this event.

"That's large," Rui raised an eyebrow. "Just how many people has Her Highness invited?"

"I believe about one thousand and forty-eight," Master Ceeran remarked.

Rui's eyebrow rose at that number. "I doubt I'd be able to have a proper conversation with Her Highness then."

"Not during the inauguration ceremony, no," Master Ceeran said. "But Her Highness is keen on speaking to you. Word of some of the terms and conditions of your deal with Prince Raijun has reached Her Highness' ears. She is quite pleased with your consideration of her campaign. She will speak with you once the ceremony ends, and she will begin speaking privately with certain guests."

"Hm, I suppose I'll have to wait for that."

"Indeed," Master Ceeran remarked as they reached the viewing gallery.

A large number of guests had already arrived. Rui had long learned to distinguish their social status from their bearing, demeanor, and body language. Each of the members here was undoubtedly important, influential, and powerful. He even recognized a few of them just based on how famous they were.

"Welcome to the inauguration of the Karokann, Master Ceeran, Senior Quarrier," A highly distinguished and dignified man greeted them once they entered the large and tall gallery. He possessed a weight that came with his experience; his appearance was immaculately groomed, and his words measured.

"Rui, allow me to introduce you to the Minister of Maritime Affairs, Jakan Ghata," Master Ceeran smiled at him, lightly gesturing at the man. "He is a trusted advisor and patron of Her Highness."

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Minister," Rui smiled courteously. "You grace me with honor by personally welcoming us."

"Not at all, Senior Quarrier," The minister smiled with equal grace. "This is a blessed and auspicious day for me. This occasion gathers many influential figures, like yourself. It would be an insult to not personally welcome them myself."

Rui smiled courteously, yet inwardly, he snorted.

The buttering process had already begun. By having his subordinates take care of all the logistics management, he could begin the campaigning process by personally making an effort to greet all the guests as the Minister of Maritime Affairs as a gesture of how much importance the Ranea Faction placed on their guests.

"I have heard much about you, Senior Quarrier," The minister directed a look of pointed interest at Rui. "You bring our nation great prestige as the youngest Martial Senior. I am also grateful for the more direct contributions that you have made to the Ranea Faction. You will not find us an ungrateful host. Please enjoy this novel and auspicious event."

"I most certainly intend to," Rui graciously replied before the two of them bade him a brief goodbye, slipping away inside.

"Minister of Maritime Affairs, hm?" Rui glanced back at the man. "He has presence and seems a competent man. It makes sense that Her Highness relies on him."

"The Ministry of Maritime Affairs is also one of Her Highness' staunch bases of power within the Kandrian government," Master Ceeran remarked. "Along the Kandrian Seafare Association. These are two most powerful entities in the Kandrian Empire's massive maritime sector and industries."

"I do recall learning about that," Rui replied.

The basic information that he had purchased did document the bases of power that each prince and princess possessed. Princess Ranea had basically won the support of national and international entities, individuals, and organizations relating to the sea industries.

Many corporations and companies related to goods and services surrounding the sea sector saw fit to throw their support behind Princess Ranea rather than Princess Rafia. The latter favored policies that would serve corporations, and this was less alluring than what Princess Ranea offered them.

Soon enough, they reached the actual viewing gallery. The floor and the walls facing the ocean were completely made of glass, allowing guests who were seated at a particularly high floor to be able to witness the unveiling of the Karokann submarine without issue.

The guests were unable to see the submarine submerged deep underwater, but Martial Seniors and Masters easily could. They would just have to pretend like they hadn't seen it when it was unveiled officially.

Rui studied the structure with some curiosity. It looked different from the submarines of Earth. He wasn't sure how well it performed since he wasn't an engineer. His somewhat shallow foundation in fluid dynamics was not enough to make an informed evaluation and judgment of the submarine's structure.

"Interesting," Rui nodded lightly. "Perhaps there is merit in expanding the Royal Navy to include a submarine division."

"That is indeed what Her Highness believes," a familiar elder voice behind him replied.

Rui didn't even need to turn around to recognize the man.

The atmosphere grew taut as faint pressure spread across the gallery.

"It's been a long time," Rui turned around, facing the elderly man. "Guildmaster Bradt."

He looked older since Rui last saw him in the banquet at the Virodhabhasa Theocracy, yet his eyes brimmed sharply with greater intensity. This man was old only in body. His ambitions were closer to that of a young man than someone who had lived a full life.

"Indeed it has," His voice was firm yet calm. "It appears that times have favored both of us alike. For both of us have ascended to greater heights in mutual cooperation."

His words mulled in the air.

"It appears that you're not satisfied with the heights you have reached," Rui noted.

"I could say the same about you."

Rui smiled wryly. "I suppose you could. Still, I didn't think we'd meet in the Kandrian Empire back when we parted ways. Always looking to make the most of any opportunity that presents itself, aren't you?"

A single word escaped his mouth.

"Always."

Chapter 1655: Favor

"The Kandrian Throne War is an opportunity of a lifetime," Guildmaster Bradt remarked with steely composure. "It would be beyond remiss of me not to capitalize on this opportunity, for it is one that could propel me to the zenith."

Rui recalled his conversation with Decker. "Ambitious."

"I seem to recall that you are indebted to me," Guildmaster Bradt narrowed his eyes as he eyed Rui. "Care to repay me now that you are a Martial Senior?"

Rui raised an eyebrow. "What would you have me to do?"

"I would have you supply me with the contribution you made to the Martial Union," Guildmaster Bradt replied, uncaring for Master Ceeran's reaction.

Rui let out a mirthless laugh. "We both know that my debt to you does not reach even a tenth of what you're asking for, even if I take into account interest on that debt."

"In that case..." Guildmaster Bradt replied. "Perhaps it would be more prudent to let both the interest and your power accrue. The youngest Martial Senior in history surely will have more to offer in the future."

Rui's expression became complicated. "I'd rather you make your demands right here and now."

"You wish," He snorted. "I will wait for you to become a Master or perhaps even a sage. Then, I will extract you a favor with the highest ROI, the likes of which this world has never seen. It would be a shame to reap an asset before it has reached its zenith."

"Continue ascending to greater heights, Rui Quarrier," He informed Rui as he turned away. "It would be to both our benefits to see that you do."

He unceremoniously departed, followed by two Martial Masters, leaving Rui behind.

"Huff..." Rui heaved a sigh, smiling wryly at the man's retreating figure, finally taking a seat with Ceeran. "In his eyes, I'm no different from shares of a company that he hopes will grow astronomically in the future."

Rui had always known that his relationship with Guildmaster Bradt was not one of friendship. He wondered if a man like Guildmaster Bradt was even capable of friendship in the first place.

"How dare he demand the secret to greater Martial Bodies," Master Ceeran narrowed his eyes. "Does he think that the Martial Union would let such disrespect slip?"

"He's in a far stronger position than before," Rui remarked calmly as he analyzed the guild master. "The Shionel Confederation has now earned the protection of two Martial Sages. It is not enough to be considered a powerhouse, but it still gives a substantial boost to its Martial power. It is now far less easy for the Martial Union to bully him. On top of that, he's firmly in the Ranea Faction, she's not going to allow the Martial Union to bully one of her patrons. She would lose all credibility among her supporters if she allowed that to happen. He knows what he can get away with. He's just trying to throw mud and see what sticks. Sly as always."

Master Ceeran's expression morphed into one of enlightenment and realization.

"Besides," Rui heaved a sigh. "Technique contribution agreements with the Martial Union require signing an exclusive license with a non-disclosure and non-dissemination clause. He knows I cannot sell it to him even if I wanted."

This was how the Martial Union became the most powerful Martial organization in East Panama, along with the Georteau Martial Association, the Sekigaharan Martial Alliance, and the Britannian Martial Order.

Though thanks to Rui's contributions, they had gained an edge over them, as Master Krakule pointed out when they spoke.

Suddenly, a wave of energy rippled through the crowd, catching Rui's attention.

"Ah, it appears that Her Highness has arrived," Master Ceeran directed an enthused glance to the entrance as many people spotted the extravagant carriage pull up to the viewing gallery, with dozens of Martial Seniors patrolling the streets that had been railed to prevent anyone from stepping even a single foot on the road while the princess was en route.

The door opened as two Martial Master bodyguards swiftly stepped out, clearing out a path for the Princess of the Seas.

Rui got his first glance at the princess as she stepped out of the carriage elegantly.

She had a much older and more mature appearance than Princess Rafia did, clearly more than just a generation older. The moment she stepped out, the crowds that had gathered in the footpaths around the viewing gallery all erupted in cheers.

"All hail Princess Ranea!"

"Long live the Princess of the Seas!"

"Welcome back to Farund, Your Highness!"

She smiled with delight, waving at the many admirers and followers that she had clearly accrued.

It made sense that there were so many people in this town who had come to develop admiration for her. She was the only princess who had showered the sea industry of the Kandrian Empire with this much support. The locals had gotten to see firsthand how much the town had been enriched with immense seafare trade due to Princess Ranean's support.

Rui knew that none of them were aware of the political undercurrents in the nation that were brewing at the moment. In their eyes, the Royal Emperor was very much their ruler and would continue to do so until he abdicated his throne or passed away.

They couldn't even begin to imagine the magnitude of the cold war that was slowly heating up between the seven prime candidates for the ruler of the Kandrian Empire. Not that he was surprised. This was how things had always been, here and back on Earth.

Only a small minute proportion of people had an understanding of the depth of political power plays, even if they supported politicians.

Of course, even this was part of her plan. She needed support from the entirety of the nautical and maritime sector of the Kandrian Empire. This included both corporations, associations, and branches of the government, but also the workers and laborers of the seafare sector, only then would she fully harness all the support she could get from this political sectors.

Chapter 1656: Presentation

"Her Highness Princess Ranea Meln Kandria has arrived!" A royal announcer announced her entry into the viewing gallery.

Most guests in the gallery bowed to varying degrees. The custom was such that even the degree to which they bowed was a testament to their social status. Martial Masters, guests from outside of the Kandrian Empire who were not citizens of the nation, and bodyguards in active duty were not required to bow; they had automatically moved to the back, furthest away from the princess, observing politics.

Rui bowed by about forty-five degrees, expressing respect to a member of the Royal Family as she made her way to the other end of the gallery, turning around at the end.

"Raise your heads," She gracefully instructed them, relieving them of their posture. "Distinguished guests from and beyond Kandria, welcome to the inauguration of the first seal-class Karokann Av412. Today the Kandrian Empire takes a historic step for all of East Panama. Today, our naval and seafaring channels will include a new dimension... a new world. A world we know less than we would admit."

More than her words, Rui was impressed by her oratory skill. She delicately controlled the pitch and tone of her voice, even quivering it to add a hint of alarm to her tone.

"The depths of the ocean are ripe with resources, just waiting to be ceased, yet our ability to reach them is crippled in comparison to our ability to extract resources from land. Today...that changes forever."

Her arms spread, and just a moment later, the visible ocean through the large glass rippled as the Karokann submarine emerged from the depth of the ocean, fully floating above the ocean water.

"Ooohh..."

"Wow..."

A wave of murmurs spread through the crowd as many of the guests beheld the first submarine of the Kandrian Empire.

"While I would love to tell you all about the marvels of this submarine, that honor belongs to the lead developer Rankan Vlaren, who oversaw the project from scratch to completion; please welcome him with a round of applause," Princess Ranea gestured to a beaming man.

"I thank Her Highness for this honor," He began. "The Karokann was truly a project that I poured my heart and soul into, yet I won't bore all of you with the full depth of the technical details, for this is a celebration, not a lecture. Today, I simply wish to convey the manner in which the Karokann defies...well, everything."

"As Her Highness rightly mentioned...the Karokann adds a new dimension to seafare. This alone will require us to break everything we thought we ever knew. Seafare will no longer be an open book but also a domain of stealth. It opens up new avenues of exploration, for the depth that the submarine can tolerate is..."

Rui listened as the developer brought up several points in defense of submarines. The exploration of the depths of the ocean was indeed quite a good point, but Rui wondered if they were entering a territory that they were sorely ill-equipped to handle.

This was especially true with the monsters of the Panama Continent. He didn't know if it was the most prudent to be so eager to set off on an adventure for the ocean floor.

Regardless, he wasn't too interested in the performance parameters of the Karokann.

While the lead developer continued on, Rui glanced at Princess Ranea, getting a good look at her. While she exerted a great deal of control, Rui could sense her enthusiasm and excitement in her eyes.

While she did not hide her royal bearing, she did seem sane, all things considered.

That was already a better start than Princess Rafia and Princess Raemina.

It reduced the probability that she had crazy ideas regarding the Kandrian Empire.

"...Thus, in this manner, submarines can revolutionize the Royal Navy as well as the underwater mining industry," Mister Rankan smiled. "I look forward to serving the Kandrian Empire in its development in the field of submarine seafaring in the future. However, for today, please enjoy the Karokann."

He offered a short bow, earning a round of applause as he made his way back into the crowd.

Princess Ranea took center stage again upon the speaking podium in the viewing gallery, addressing the crowd. "Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, submarines are the future for all matters beneath the ocean surface. They will be at the forefront of all things furtive and clandestine in the ocean. They will be at the forefront of securing the Kandrian Empire's dominance across the marine sector, after all..."

Rui narrowed his eyes at those words as a confident smile appeared on her face. "As Empress, my first act shall be to commission the development of ten thousand such submarines!"

Rui's eyes widened as he recalled the stated cost of development of the submarine, estimating the total cost of such a venture, including estimated costs for expanding manufacturing capabilities to complete such a vast number within a reasonable timeframe.

'That's huge!' Rui stared at her with a stunned expression. 'That's already close to one-fourth of the annual fiscal budget of the Kandrian Empire!'

That may not sound like much, but it was absolutely bonkers. Such a huge chunk was being dedicated solely to the production of submarines!

"With an enormous fleet of submarines, the Kandrian Empire's seafaring power will be unrivaled across the entire continent!" She declared. "Be it trade flux, be it extract and mining, be it defense, this great Empire will be the strongest in the entire world! We shall hold no bars to developing our marine and naval sectors to the absolute limit, no matter the cost!"

Rui stared at her as she confidently unveiled her commitment to aggressively expanding the Kandrian Empire's navy.

This didn't even include the expenses of her other ambitions, like similarly expanding the shipbuilding prowess of the Kandrian Empire and the ports and harbors to increase seafare and trade flux to and from the Kandrian Empire.

'Just how much does she want to drain the nation to fund her ambitions?!'

Chapter 1657: Overexpenditure

The princess continued talking about the extent to which she intended to expand the Kandrian Empire's maritime and trade sector with not just more submarines but everything.

By that time, Rui was unable to even keep track of just how much she was spending, but it was already starting to reach the sum total of the total annual budget every year!

She was going to spend the entire nation's total resources on expanding the maritime sector of the Kandrian Empire!

The entire nation was going to slowly crumble from malnutrition while the maritime sector would boom in turn. Admittedly, this would not strictly lead to the destruction of the Kandrian Empire, but it was going to result in a very rough, painful, and perhaps even violent transition to a maritime nation. It would slowly erode away all other sectors of the nation, amplifying the maritime sector instead. Rui didn't even know how much damage this would cause to the nation before it finally stabilized into the image of her dreams.

"...And that brings an end to my Royal ambitions, distinguished guests. Today is the first day I have openly revealed the extent of my full plan for the future of the Kandrian Empire." She remarked. "The Karokann submarine is just the first of countless to come, mark my words. Please take it upon yourselves to enjoy the Karokann; tours of the Karokann have been prepared all day long once it docks at the port. Each of you can experience the incredible experience of being in a submarine. I would like to offer a special thanks to the Kandrian Seafaring Association and the Ministry of Maritime Affairs for this day, for it would not have come without their tireless support. I thank you all for partaking in this little unveiling event."

A thundering round of applause followed as she concluded her little speech, dispelling the formal air of the event.

Rui simply stared at her with sharp eyes, throwing a little side-eye to Guildmaster Bradt, who simply stared at him knowingly. He turned back to the Princess of the Seas with a skeptical expression.

She immediately noticed their gaze, smiling at him as she approached him.

"Master Ceeran, I am pleased to see you here. Did you enjoy the unveiling of the Karokann?"

"It was truly fascinating, Your Highness," Master Ceeran smiled.

"I am pleased to hear that, Master Ceeran," She smiled warmly at him, turning to Rui. "It is truly a pleasure to meet you. I have been looking forward to it for quite some time."

"It is a pleasure to meet you as well, Your Highness," Rui smiled courteously. "I truly appreciate the invitation to this event. Your speech was...interesting, I wished to speak to you about it and other matters as well."

"As did I," She smiled. "Why don't we find ourselves a more private setting to discuss sensitive matters?"

"That would be just fine."

As he interacted with her, he got the hopeful sense that she could be reasoned with. Perhaps there was something that he was missing about his estimations of the economic burden that her plans were bound to put on the Kandrian Empire.

He would hope that that was the case.

Eventually, they found themselves seated in a room with a glass wall featuring the Karokann that was now docked to the harbor.

"It's quite the vessel," Rui remarked, breaking the ice. "The fact that our Empire is among the very first to develop this technology is indeed a source of great pride and optimism."

She beamed at his praise as she beheld the Karokann with loving eyes. "It is an endeavor that I have done my very best to pursue. While I may not have worked on the submarine myself, it brings me great joy and pride to know that my efforts contributed to this day unfolding in such a fashion.

She openly admired the submarine even as they spoke to each other. It appeared the information he purchased from the Martial Union was factually accurate. She did indeed care a lot about all things sea-related.

That didn't inspire a lot of hope in him.

"Your Highness," Rui drew her attention. "The revelations of your royal ambition earlier...were you perhaps exaggerating some of the numbers and figures that you presented earlier?"

"Why, not at all," She tilted her head, looking at Rui strangely. "What makes you say that?"

"Well...It's because I was hoping they were exaggerated," Rui narrowed his eyes. "Even now."

She made his sharp gaze head-on. "And what makes you say that?"

"Because your ambitions are too great for the empire," Rui replied. "Simple and even conservative estimates of the total expenses of your ambitions have already soared into the trillions of gold coins. That's already a substantial fraction of our fiscal year and our GDP. The Kandrian Empire cannot sustain such a titanic expenditure of wealth. You will cripple entire sectors of our nation."

"I do not intend to increase the taxes on our people."

"In that case, you will be hampering the other sectors of our nation that require funds that you will be redirecting towards commissioning and subsidizing the seafaring and maritime sector," Rui replied, narrowing his eyes. "The Martial Art sector is the only sector powerful enough such that it will not be affected by this whatsoever, but other sectors of the nation that rely on these funds...They will be crippled."

"I disagree with your evaluation," She firmly said. "Once the maritime and sea sector arises, the Kandrian Empire will depend on the sea sector more than any of the other sectors in our empire."

"Do you know how many people will suffer before the Kandrian Empire stabilizes from your volatile and violent shift in focus?" Rui stared at her in disbelief. "You cannot just uproot the order of our empire and replace it with a new one and hope that no one gets hurt."

"It does not please me, but it is a necessary sacrifice to elevate the empire to even greater heights," She remarked. "It is not impossible for the Kandrian Empire to become the richest empire in this world."

Chapter 1658: A New Age

"What...?" Rui stared at her. Though he had an inkling of what she was talking about.

"Of the four powerhouses of East Panama, the Kandrian Empire is the only one that is deeply connected to the Great Nam Ocean," She replied. "The other three powerhouses are landlocked and also quite

distant from the coast, making it far more difficult for them. This is an enormous advantage for the Kandrian Empire that we have been remiss in capitalizing on sufficiently enough."

Rui stared at her, waiting for her to finish the argument in compelling him.

"It is possible for the Kandrian Empire to shoot past the three powerhouses by maximizing the potential of the Great Nam Ocean," She insisted. "While it is by far the largest, deepest, and most dangerous ocean in the world, it is also the most bountiful ocean in the world."

"So you're saying..."

"Yes, Rui Quarrier," She firmly affirmed. "If we can tap into the resources of the Great Nam Ocean with a developed sub-marine sector and industry that receives the funding and resources it needs to be prepared enough to maximize the potential of the Great Nam Ocean, then we can reach a much higher stage in the world than even what we have now."

She paused for a moment, sipping some tea that her servants had poured both of them. "The simplest ROI is gold. The esoteric marina gold that forms the basis of the Kandrian currency system was all mined from the shores and shallow parts of the ocean around the Kandrian Empire. However, some of the deeper surveys that I have had the Kandrian Seafare Association and the Ministry of Maritime Affairs conduct have given us reason to believe that there are far greater reserves much deeper in the Great Nam Ocean. However..."

"I assume the depth of these marina gold mines is quite challenging."

Princess Ranea nodded. "Kilometers at a bare minimum. However, the greater the depth, the greater the bounty of resources. By our estimates, if we can successfully harness the resources, then we can get a hundred percent ROI, perhaps even more, for even the massive expenditure that I had elucidated about earlier. It will easily justify all my decisions and enrich the Empire."

"There is a reason that the Great Nam Ocean has not been fully scaled nor mined," Rui replied with a stern voice. "The depth is one thing, but there are also powerful aquatic monsters that undoubtedly increase the difficulty of meaningful success and increase losses tremendously. Krakens, scyllas, jormunganders, leviathans, charybdises, umibozus... With such known horrifying monsters increasingly common towards the epicenter. Some even consider it the marine Beast Domain."

Most of the shipping routes were directed along the coasts of the Panama Continent.

There was a reason for this. The closer one got to the epicenter of the Great Nam Ocean, the more dangerous things were. It was like trying to cross through the epicenter of the Beast Domain while traveling on land from one side of the Panama Continent to the other.

It was madness.

The depths of the center of the great ocean were distanced from human civilization by virtue of not only distance but also the limitations of their medium of life. Life that had adapted to survive the depths of the Great Nam Ocean could not survive except for those depths of the ocean.

That was why the relationship between humanity and the depths of the Great Nam Ocean was fundamentally different from the relationship between humanity and the Beast Domain. The Beast Domain was a lot more easily accessible, making it more dangerous to humanity and vice versa.

This was not true for the Great Nam Ocean. There were far greater barriers that existed between humanity and the depths of the Great Nam Ocean; neither could easily intrude upon the other. This had caused humanity to take an 'out of sight, out of mind' approach to the perils of the depths of the Great Nam Ocean.

Princess Ranea's ambitions, however, fundamentally embodied a different philosophy. She was willing to cross the barriers separating them and plunge to the depths of the Great Nam Ocean at her own peril to claim the bounties it hid.

"So let me get this straight, Your Highness..." Rui stared at her. "You wish to uproot several sectors, cutting funding to them, causing mass unemployment that could easily cause a recession, and then redirect all those resources to a maritime and seafare expansion for greater trade, as well as a sub-

marine sector in hopes of extracting the perilous bounties that the Great Nam Ocean has to offer? Such that it can justify the sheer amount of expenditure you invested and more?"

"Precisely," She declared.

Her blunt honesty was refreshing. She didn't try to mislead him.

Rui stared at her with narrowed eyes. "Even putting aside the guaranteed suffering that your plan will spread, the sheer risks you are undertaking are such that if you fail even in the slightest, you will bring about the destruction of the Kandrian Empire."

"I have a much higher opinion of our ability to overcome the risk, but even still, risk is always inevitable. Always. Especially if you want to rise," She boldly declared. "Unlike that warmongering fool Randal, I intend to endeavor productive ventures that promise great yield instead of war that simply destroys any and everything. The rest of my siblings, barring Raul, do not have a vision for the Empire that didn't come from selling themselves to their patrons. Especially that despicable bastard Rajak."

She snorted with disdain, turning back to Rui. "At least I have a definite vision that came from myself. I was the one who approached the Kandrian Seafare Association and the Minister of Maritime Affairs with my grand ambitions. And eventually, I will compel the entire nation with my vision of the future."

She turned to Rui. "I will unveil a new age within the Kandrian Empire, then East Panama, and eventually, the entire world."

Her eyes grew more defiant.

"The Age of Sailors."

Rui stared at her with disbelief as she uttered her ambitions to change the world.

Chapter 1659: Ambition

Rui stared at her dumbfounded.

He couldn't believe that she had such an absurdly ambitious dream.

Set off a new age?

An age of sailors?

"With all due respect, Your Highness, that's a pipe dream," Rui heaved a sigh.

"Do you truly believe that, Senior Quarrier?" She stared at him. "An age is defined by the most characteristic trait in that age, and in this era, that is Martial Art. If ambition for the ocean one day drives Kandria, and then it will also eventually impact East Panama. That is how powerful and influential our country is."

Rui heaved a tired sigh. "Your Highness, you are far more extreme than I had imagined or been informed."

"Hah, I have only divulged a greater fraction of my ambition today due to the historic event. However, I do have dreams that I will fulfill as Empress."

"Is that so?" Rui shook his head lightly. "Your ambitions will definitely cripple many and potentially bring this nation to ruin. Do you think it is appropriate for an Empress to burden her nation with her personal ambition?"

"Ambition is the largest fuel for growth after necessity and fear," She firmly pushed back. "Would you rather we grow only when we need to or out of fear, or would you rather we grow out of ambition? Look at you. You're a Martial Artist driven by powerful personal ambition. Look at where it got you. You're probably the most sought Martial Senior in the Kandrian Empire."

Rui had to admit that she was quite rhetorically effective. It was not easy for him to dismiss the argument when he most certainly was driven by ambition and owed his success to his unrelenting drive to fulfill an ambition that had transcended worlds and lives.

The issue was that there was a difference between being rhetorically effective and correct. As far as Rui was concerned, there was a difference between personal and political ambition. Every individual was responsible for themselves and bore the brunt of their own choices, but a nation bore the brunt of its ruler's choices.

However, he could see that there was too much of a fundamental disconnect between them. He could keenly tell that whatever rationalization she had cooked up was ad hoc and came after her ambition. Her ambition preceded all of it; she simply formed her political ideology around it to justify it as a ruler.

It meant that there really was no arguing with her, which, of course, was obvious. There was nothing he could say that would shake her off her current track.

He was disappointed, frustrated even. Who could have thought that something as uncontroversial on the surface as focusing on the seafaring and maritime industry would end up being so extreme that it was just almost as undesirable as some of the other princes and princesses that he had rejected?

Of course, if forced between someone like Prince Randal and her, he would still reluctantly choose her. But he wanted a candidate he could wholeheartedly support.

"It's a shame that you don't seem receptive to my politics," She nonchalantly remarked. "After all that you did to help me in restraining Raijun's offensive maneuvers against me."

"You don't seem very grateful," Rui snorted.

She shrugged. "I am going to ascend the throne regardless. Though I suppose...I should tell you that I am grateful indeed. However, you made that agreement based on an incomplete understanding of my ambitions. It's not your fault since it hasn't remained the same. Had the submarine project failed, I would have been forced to take a less ambitious stance on sub-marine policy."

She was shamelessly confident in her victory, to the point that Rui could only heave a sigh. "I see."

"You may not agree with the outcome of my politics, but I would venture to suspect that you probably will end up finding my political agenda to be the least disagreeable out of all the seven prime candidates," Princess Ranea smirked. "Join me, Rui Quarrier. Your Martial Art. Your talent. Your magical knowledge. Your mind. Lend them to me. Help me become Empress, and I can promise you that I will accommodate your desire to maintain order in the Kandrian Empire as much as possible while I apply my designs to the empire."

"So I should support you because you're the least bad for this nation?" Rui raised an eyebrow. "And if I support you, you will do your best to restrain the magnitude of how bad I think your policies are when you act them?"

"Pretty much," She casually replied.

Her demeanor was distinctively different from the other two princesses, who maintain suffocating formality. Yet it was also different from Prince Raijun, who always had an undertone of respect and admiration for Rui. Her attitude was more indifferent now that she was out of the public eye and didn't need to maintain an image.

She had expressed the least desire for Rui among her siblings, perhaps largely because Rui's value as a supporter intersected the least with her interests.

He did appreciate the fact that she didn't try to alter her words or her rhetoric to make it more palatable to him. She was willing to accept the consequence of not winning his support.

Perhaps it was because she didn't think he could make a substantial impact beyond what he had. It wasn't a strange thought; Rui's outsized value exceeded his Martial power, but could he continuously supply the value that a Master could through his odd extra-Martial means?

It was not entirely clear. Especially to someone like Princess Ranea, who was focused on fields and domains that Rui hadn't proven competence in. She simply did not have any idea that he could offer much utility, Martial or otherwise, in aiding with her ambitions, and that reflected in her nonchalance.

Though part of it was certainly her brashness that she had done well to hide earlier, he wouldn't mind working with someone of her temperament, honestly. It was a shame that he didn't care to.

Chapter 1660: Strange Detour

Rui exited the room, heading back to the viewing gallery before running into Master Ceeran once more.

"Ah, how did it go, Rui?" He asked eagerly.

"Interesting, but ultimately fruitless," Rui replied. "It probably won't be joining Her Highness' campaign."

"I see...that's a shame," Master Ceeran remarked. "If you're partaking in the Kandrian Throne War, then you only have two princes left. You might want to reconsider some of your choices. After all, you only have the People's Prince and the Underworld Prince, and both of them are bad choices."

Rui turned to him with a curious look. "Why do you think so?"

"It should be obvious. The Underworld Prince is a little bastard who caught up with the mafias and the black market. Sometimes, I don't understand why the Royal Family doesn't just clean that entire mess up with force." Master Ceeran snorted. "The People's Prince, on the other hand, is a peasant-loving prince who puts their interests above all. I'm surprised that any Martial Artist supports him at all."

Rui stared at Master Ceeran with a quizzical expression. It was interesting to see how a Martial Master of the Martial Union regarded the People's Prince. Apparently, a prince that put the people first was an eyesore. He wasn't sure why the Master would come to think in such a manner. Then again, he wasn't a Martial Master of the Martial Union.

At that point, he had diverged so much from the average human that they weren't even of the same species anymore.

"The Royal Family cannot wipe out the Kandrian Underworld for the same reason that no other state in the world has succeeded in curbing the black market," Rui replied calmly. "Supply always meets demand. Always. No amount of restrictions, sanctions, or proactive or reactive measures are ever enough to stop it. If it's illegal but highly demanded, people will get their hands on it, one way or another. The only way to destroy the Underworld is to legalize the trade of the black market. Otherwise, they will always lurk in the shadows."

"You think the Royal Family does not have the power to find and annihilate the black market?" Master Ceeran asked, raising an eyebrow.

"It's more complicated than that," Rui explained. "The black market has decades...centuries of experience in evading any form of law enforcement and overcoming any hurdle. They understand the Kandrian Empire better than anybody else. They know this nation backward front and inside out. They

know the chinks and holes in the system extremely well. They know it well and have capitalized on it even better. That is why finding them is difficult. However, you are correct in that the Royal Family and the Kandrian Empire could find them if they employed all their power. The issue is that that would provoke a war."

"The Royal Family is stronger," Master Ceeran snorted.

"It is, but a civil war between the Royal Family and the Six Dons will ruin the nation. Since Martial Sages will be involved," Rui heaved a sigh. "The losses this nation will be catastrophic, so much more that the Kandrian Royal Family purposefully does not escalate it to active war. It is mostly limited to prevention and restriction in an attempt to suffocate the Underworld."

"They are essentially holding the nation hostage," Master Ceeran remarked.

"Indeed," Rui heaved a sigh. "It's also why Prince Rajak can get away with having the Underworld as his patron. As long as he doesn't mess up, he won't suffer any negative consequences. The Underworld is powerful, although it suffers the disadvantage of the government being averse to it, which is why Prince Rajak is not able to get a lead even though he has the entirety of the third most powerful faction of Kandria behind him. The crowning ceremony officiates the ruler, and the government controls it; this is something even the Underworld can do nothing about."

The Underworld was the third most powerful force in the Kandrian Empire holistically. While the maritime sector and the Underworld were roughly peers economically, the Underworld was much more Martially powerful. Yet their intense enmity with the government made it much more challenging to leverage it to make Prince Rajak the Emperor.

Rui heaved a sigh of relief. If not for this crucial disadvantage, then there was a chance that the Underworld Prince would have surpassed the other six. Regardless, this wasn't something that was all that relevant to Rui. He would never accept the invitation of the Underworld prince; there was absolutely no discussion to be had. Not after the suffering that they had caused to the orphanage.

"I'll be taking my leave here," Rui heaved a sigh, getting up. "I've viewed the Karokann and spoken to Her Highness; there's nothing left me here."

"I see, then, until next time," Master Ceeran smiled.

He bade the Master goodbye, navigating past the crowd and the immense security until he finally descended the steps outside, leaving the viewing gallery. The crowd outside had diminished, but there were still plenty of people watching the Karokann from a distance.

He was just about to sky-walk when a sign caught his attention.

[Martial security protocols: No sky-walking or jumping permitted.]

Apparently, stopping unauthorized sky-walking after the event began was part of the security protocols? He found that rather strange when compared with other formal events hosting members of the Royal Family but abided by it nonetheless, heading northeast in the direction of the Mantian Region.

Just before he reached the range from where he could sky-

walk, suddenly;

"Look, it's the Karokann!"

"I want to get a better view!"

"Move out of the way!"

Rui tutted in irritation as he tried squeezing past the crowd without killing anybody accidentally. He had gotten so used to evading crowds that this experience was almost entirely new for him.

Yet waves of crowds washed just down the street, trying to move in the opposite direction as him. He would have loved to have just jumped above them, but the guards stationed across the street were staring at him pointedly.

"Alleys it is," He squeezed through the buildings, heading through the network of alleys in some of the poorer parts of the town. The population here was scarce and was of the type that was too poor to care about a submarine.