

Martial Unity 1671

Chapter 1671: Stance Evaluation

Her stance was transparent. Frankly, he didn't even need to use systemized thought to deduce her fighting style and intentions.

'Legs positioned to minimize lag in the transition to sprinting,' He noted. 'It can be inferred that she's going to be rushing at me the moment this fight begins. On top of that, a coiled upper body for maximal torque for a punch, based on the balled fist. So, a sprint and full-powered blow from the get-go, hm?'

Those weren't the only inferences to be made.

'She's not worried about the gaps in the defenses of her stance. She doesn't appear to have highly conditioned durability, either. Thus, it appears that she's going all out on her offense, disregarding defense, which means...' Rui made his choice in accordance with the stance evaluation system.

His arms rose up defensively as he spread his legs, dividing his weight equally. This was a stance that favored balance and stability without putting too much weight on maneuvering.

"Come," Rui commenced the battle.

She didn't hesitate.

WHOOSH!

She propelled herself forward at tremendous speeds, leaving behind a sonic boom in her wake as she raced forward toward Rui.

BOOM!

Her powerful blow crashed into his propped arm with overwhelming momentum. Yet her eyes widened as she felt the impact disappearing even before it could bloom. It was like water being drained away into a drain hole in a tub.

POW POW POW!

Rui blasted her with a barrage of blows after dispelling the impact of her attack cleanly with Flux Earther. She barely managed to block the sharply-timed swift attacks with her guard.

Yet...

VMMM!

"Urgh!" She grimaced

Reverberating Lance permeated the impacts deep.

Without the Martial Heart and without his stamina drained, the gap between their bodies was smaller. Without that gap, many Martial Seniors would never have been able to contend with Rui at all.

His application of power was too sublime to be overcome without anything other than a significant power gap. This was even when he wasn't using the VOID algorithm but even a greatly inferior voidlet technique.

Yet she wasn't done.

"HRYAH!" A barrage of flowing attacks blasted into him.

BAM BAM BAM BAM BAM!

Each of them was drained to the earth as Rui cleanly timed Flux Earth each time, draining the power of each of her blows and transmitting them back to earth each time. He became a living conduit of flowing power.

Her expression intensified as she launched a fearsome kick at his head.

WHOOSH!

Rui cleanly crouched, launching a sweeping kick as her angle.

BAM!

She ignored the impact, redirecting her high kick into a powerful axe kick.

BOOM!!

Rui leaped away, barely evading the thundering impact.

Yet she had no intention of letting him get away.

"HAH!"

BAM BAM BAM BAM BAM!!

She wasn't able to use breathing techniques, but those weren't the only ways to supplement and augment striking power. Her powerful legs pushed forward, parallel with the ground, driving her fists with twice as much power as when she raced after him.

The barrage of blows continued for quite a while.

They only grew stronger.

BOOM! BOOM BOOM!

Rui's eyes sharpened with intensity.

Her blows shook the ground even as he dispersed them into the lands beneath their feet. Not even Flux Earther could fully disperse them.

WHOOSH!

Her eyes widened as her blow struck an empty image.

A feint.

A chill crawled down her spine as she immediately retreated.

Yet, it was too late.

BAM!

A swift, short blow cleanly crashed into her jaw, violently rocking her head and rendering her disoriented and dizzy.

Rui was not generous enough to ignore such a clean opportunity.

BAM!

His kick struck her jaw, causing the blunt force trauma to exceed the limiting threshold.

THUD!

She fell to the ground, unconscious.

He heaved a soft sigh, turning to the spectating Masters. "I'm sure I don't need to explain to your insightful and sharp Masteries what happened this battle. Application of power. Timing. Placement. This is what the voidlet techniques help optimize. With an accurate system of thought, it increases the user's ability to make the right decisions. Its utility against offensive Martial Artists was demonstrated well in this battle."

He turned to the Martial Senior of the Earth Sect. "Let us begin the demonstration against defense."

The Martial Senior of the Earth Sect walked into the sparring arena as he eyed the Fire Sect Martial Senior, who was being carried away. He turned towards Rui with a wary expression.

The domineering demonstration of the previous round, in addition to Rui's immense prestige in the Kandrian Empire, put a lot of pressure on his back.

He also felt inferior when he considered that Rui had already reached his grade of power at the mere age of thirty. The fact that he had broken through to the Senior Realm seven years ago was truly shocking. He was facing a real prodigy who shined so bright that nearly every Martial Sect in the Kandrian Empire, including his, lusted after the young man.

"Are you familiar with the rules?" Rui asked.

The man nodded, reciting the limitations of the match.

"Well then," Rui took a neutral stance.

The defensive Martial Senior followed suit, taking a fortress of a stance. His large barrel arms came to the forefront, guarding his abdomen as he centered his legs close to his body. He gave the impression of a dense, thick fort wall.

Rui's stance shifted as he analyzed the man's.

'Given his stature as a defensive Martial Artist, his defense is mostly passive,' Rui realized. 'Though centered legs is a stance that favors maneuvering rather than balance and stability.'

If his opponent's defense was mostly massive, then Rui couldn't focus too much on maneuvering, though his offense could not be forsaken either.

This time, Rui focused on speed and power more than anything else. Yet that wasn't all; no defense was perfect; Rui was already able to see ways in which he could break through the man's armor.

Chapter 1672: Future

"Let's begin," Rui narrowed his eyes as he raced in, preparing a powerful attack.

BOOM!!

A powerful Flowing Canon crashed into the man's guard, rocking it where he stood.

Yet it held firm.

Rui raised an eyebrow as the man held on strong, impressed by his resilience.

Yet he was far from done.

WHOOSH

He smoothly swirled to the side, launching a swift upper kick to the man's head.

BAM!

The man barely managed to shift in time, blocking the powerful blow with a guard. Yet the impact imbalanced him slightly. Reverberating Lance permeated the impact through his guard, hurting him despite it.

BAM BAM BAM!!!

Rui blasted the man with an onslaught of blows and attacks. Each of them rattled his guard, but more than anything, he was constantly forced to shift his guard, for Rui never once attacked in the same place.

His guard was as hard as esoteric rock; the power of his Martial Body was higher than that of Rui's, so he would never be able to break past his guard with straightforward clashes.

That was why he focused his stance just enough on maneuvering such that he could constantly shift around and target his weaknesses and vulnerabilities.

As tough as his guard was, it was also heavy. It wasn't easy for him to shift it around constantly.

BAM BAM BAM!

The man gritted his teeth as he constantly stepped around, trying to adjust to Rui's maneuvers.

Yet Rui had no intention of slowing down.

He didn't speed either, he just maintained the pacing and patterns of striking that he normally did.

Time passed as the defensive Martial Senior grew increasingly comfortable with dealing with Rui's offense.

That was his biggest mistake.

WHOOSH!

His eyes widened as he realized he had shifted his guard preemptively in anticipation of an attack from the rear.

His prediction was wrong.

SPLAT!

"Gah!" The man screamed in pain as his eyes bled.

Rui had cleanly jabbed him in the eyes, making them bleed.

BAM!

The abrupt pain from the wound had caused his guard to become dismantled, giving Rui a clear path to victory.

CLASP!

His arms coiled around the man's neck and head, squeezing extremely hard.

It was over rather quickly.

He turned to the spectating Martial Masters. "This battle highlighted the ability of the system of thought to capitalize on the shortcomings of the opponent, to stress and strain them to the point of causing the opponent to eventually make a blunder. This is the blunder induction system."

It was a simple philosophy of a strategy that Rui had codified into the earliest iterations of the VOID algorithm before he had ventured to create the pattern recognition system.

It was also the basis of the set of voidlet techniques he had created.

"Imagine if every Martial Apprentice was able to fight so strategically. So thoughtfully," Rui remarked. "That is the value that these techniques are able to make."

The Martial Masters listened to his explanations with intrigued expressions.

It was true that if every Martial Apprentice fought in this manner from the very get-go, by the time they reached the Senior Realm, their affinities for the Master Realm would already be much higher.

"Alright, let us get to the final battle," Rui calmly replied after having consumed a potion to restore his stamina.

He turned to the Martial Senior of the Lightning Sect.

It was not Kane, unfortunately.

But then again, it was perhaps for the better. He knew Kane's patterns too well; he might subconsciously use the predictive model, which would contaminate the demonstration.

The Martial Senior of the Lightning Sect was a lean man, which was to be expected. He silently took a light-stepped loose stance that allowed for free-flowing maneuvering.

Rui took a defensive stance, this time with a knowing expression. "Let's begin."

WHOOSH!

Immediately, the maneuvering-oriented Martial Artist raced forward, yet as he approached Rui, he swiftly swirled around for his back, aiming for his vulnerability.

It was a similar strategy to the one Rui had just employed in the previous fight. Yet Rui was not nearly as slow as his opponent.

POW POW POW!

He managed to block the barrage of blows cleanly. Yet his opponent was unperturbed, turning to different points of entry to inflict damage on Rui.

POW POW POW!

The battle took on a rather dynamic turn as Rui circled about a single spot as the maneuvering Martial Artist buzzed about him like a bee, seeking to inflict as much damage onto his vitals as possible.

FLICK!

The maneuvering Martial Artist smirked as he managed to inflict a cut on Rui's body before he could guard against it.

Yet he wasn't done.

WHOOSH!

He accelerated into a blur, circling around Rui at immense speeds, throwing many swift and short blows as he pushed Rui to defend against as many as possible.

His maneuvers grew aggressive as he confirmed Rui's passivity, growing quicker and faster in his combos.

SPLAT!

A triumphant grin emerged on his face as he managed to land a deep gash on Rui, swiftly leaping away.

CLASP!

Yet he could only widen his eyes as Rui managed to catch his hair just before it slipped away.

His dark, swirling eyes pierced into the man's. "Got you now."

BAM!!!

He pulled the man's head down as he blasted it with knees, over and over.

THUD

He threw the man away when he was done, lest he break his skull. His face was unrecognizable; even his nose had been completely shattered, mashed, bleeding profusely as he coughed and gasped.

"Huff..." Rui heaved a sigh, turning to the Masters one more time. "That there was a technique that embodies the philosophy of strategic sacrifice. Calculated sacrifices to deal with opponents that are hard to engage with. While the wound he inflicted was damaging, it was nothing compared to the damage I could inflict if I could actually get my hands on him. Thus, I abandoned all preparation for defense and instead prepared to time as clinch, allowing me to win the fight."

The Martial Masters thoughtfully considered his words.

"A future where all Martial Apprentices fight with such thought is a future with more Martial Masters," Rui declared by the end, offering a simple bow. "Thank you for attending this simple presentation."

Chapter 1673: Afterthoughts

His presentation didn't contain even a hint of flamboyance and extravagance. He didn't want to go for any exorbitance or flashiness. He simply wanted to cleanly prove the mettle of the thought-centric techniques that he would be providing to them. There was no need for anything more, and these Martial Masters would probably not appreciate it if he tried impressing them with anything other than Martial Art. It would be seen as a sign of weakness and a concession that his technique wasn't all that impressive and that he couldn't rely on a transparent presentation to impress them.

That was why he abstained from using the Metabody System or the Hypnomatrix. Now was not the time to employ those. Those were so powerful that they would completely defeat the point of the demonstrations.

In this way, instead, he conveyed the impact of the voidlet techniques.

He heaved a sigh once the presentation ended as the Martial Masters came over him.

"Congratulations, that was a solid presentation that displayed the power of thought as cleanly as could be," Master Ceeran praised him with a smile, turning to his peers. "What do all of you think? Didn't I tell you that he has a special affinity for thought?"

"Indeed..." Master Vericita smiled. "That much is certain. You were gifted with the power of thought. It is rare to see anybody who is gifted with the power of thought pursue Martial Art. Usually, they all become scholars since it is perceived that the scholarly pursuit of knowledge is the only manner to apply the talent of thought. You are a rare example of a genius of mind, among other things, who has blessed Martial Art by choosing to become a Martial Artist."

It was true that the general perception of the world was that Martial Art was a brutish field of body. Only those who were blessed with bodily progress ought to consider pursuing Martial Art.

Of course, those within Martial Art knew that this was false. And those who knew about the secret of the Master Realm knew that not only was it false, but it was also a harmful and dangerous mindset.

However, it was not easy to convey the importance of thought without divulging the secret of the Master Realm, and that was something that was absolutely unacceptable. Not only would it negatively

impact them to learn of the secret of the Master Realm to learn of it before they were worthy of it, but it was also a strategic secret of vital importance to maintaining the dominance of the Kandrian Empire.

"Of course, Master," Rui nodded. "I have no intention of reneging."

"Senior Quarrier," A powerful elder Martial Artist drew his attention.

He was of the Earth Sect.

"It may please you to know that the Earth Sect has decided to support your initiative," The Master informed him calmly. "We are impressed by the thoughtful defense that you have demonstrated against the Fire Sect's warrior. We believe that it would do the field of defense to introduce this element of systemized strategy that you have demonstrated."

"Your support is gratifying, Master Frukkel," Rui bowed his head lightly. "Mmmm, do well to keep progressing, young man," He remarked lightly before taking off.

"The Lightning Sect will take the matter regarding your Martial Art into consideration," The Master of the Lightning Sect informed him with an aloof expression before taking off.

It seemed that he wasn't able to get a confirmation of support from the Lightning Sect.

Ah well...

It couldn't be helped. He hadn't done the best with portraying how the voidlet techniques would do with maneuvering.

Martial Masters of other sects found his thought techniques to be worth the investment, however. They all came over one at a time, offering their praise and feedback, as well as the stance of their sects on the matter regarding its stance on his voidlet techniques and its propagation.

Chapter 1674: The Power of People

Soon enough, the presentation ended just like that. The Martial Masters dispersed, returning to their sects, and Rui was finally left alone with a little bit of peace. He had finished the final deadline that he had left. Thus, he was no longer under any pressure of time.

He could fully dedicate himself to the four domain techniques that he had been working on for quite some time.

Yet by the time he returned home, he found an angry Kane waiting for him.

"Rui!" He glared at him. "I know you're responsible for Princess Rafia wanting to marry me."

Rui burst out laughing as his machinations bore fruit successfully. "Stop laughing!" He complained as Rui wheezed, stumbling around. "I know you're responsible for that!"

"Man..." Rui finally gathered himself. "That's fucking hilarious."

Kane massaged his temples, heaving a stressed sigh. "Fae stopped talking to me ever since that happened."

"What?" Rui burst out laughing again. "You have fun with those two. Who knows, maybe you can bag both of them and get a harem."

"Stop laughing!" Kane growled, earning more laughter from Rui. "Good luck," Rui patted his shoulder, laughing as he sky-walked away. He didn't want anything more to do with Princess Rafia. Her presence freaked him out, and he would rather stay the hell away from anything that involved her. Even though he wanted nothing to do with any of them, he knew that, for the things that mattered to him, he needed to make an effort to meet one last prince.

He had already met Princess Raemina, Raijun, Rafia, Ranea, and Rajak.

The only ones he hadn't met were Prince Raul and Prince Randal. Though Prince Randal had certainly interacted with him using a member of the Hawk Faction, the offer to join them was still open.

Rui recalled one incident that the Beggar's Sect and the Martial Union both mentioned in their information packages on Prince Raul.

Eleven years ago, when the Shionel Dungeon had opened up to the rest of the world, the Kandrian Emperor had passed a Royal Bill that would have reduced the subsidies to the agricultural industry to redirect funds to the Shionel Dungeon to procure certain esoterics that were necessary in artifacts and products that were commonly used in the farming industry to allow them to naturally sustain themselves as opposed to relying on bailouts from the government.

Yet, allegedly, Prince Raul disapproved of the legislative decision to remove support for the average farmer.

He decided to act.

With a single command, the farmers across the entire nation gathered and united in a protest and boycott of all agricultural production. The Kandrian Ruffians relied on their treasury, which, while much lower than the other six princes and princesses, was more than enough to sustain the farmers in their boycott of any and all activities.

It was a blatant act of defiance to the Royal Emperor. It could even be considered treachery.

Yet the Royal Emperor was shackled in his ability to act. He could not do something as tyrannical as deploying the army to force the farmers to work against that will; that would be absolutely unprecedented and an even greater sin than Prince Raul's treachery. It would forever lose him any semblance of cooperation with the farmers of the agricultural industry of Kandria.

He could not arrest his own son, either. Prince Raul was not only beloved by everybody and their mother, literally but had also earned the absolute loyalty of many powerful Martial Artists.

Including Sage Farana of the Kandrian Border Patrol Force. The probability that at least some of the Martial Masters and Seniors would defy any legal action against him was high. And if Sage Farana herself decided to disallow his arrest, then it would be an absolute catastrophe. The Kandrian Empire could not allow a conflict between Martial Sages to unfold in the Empire. That was absolutely not tolerable.

He could not do anything to the farmers, he could not do anything to Raijun, he could not do anything to the Kandrian Ruffians that had embedded themselves amongst the people, indistinguishable. The Royal Emperor was forced to rescind the Royal Bill lest the Kandrian Empire be consumed by what was an increasingly intensifying civil conflict. In this manner, Prince Raul had overwhelmed the Royal Emperor himself.

This was why, despite having the least amount of wealth, Martial power, resources, land, and authority. He was feared by the other six candidates for the throne.

Such was the power of Raul Viva Kandria.

Chapter 1675: Seeker of Shelter

If he truly wanted, he could cripple the Kandrian Seafare Association by manipulating the people with their absolute adoration and loyalty to him.

If he truly wanted, he could cripple the Underworld by cutting off demand for the illegal goods and services that they supplied.

If he truly wanted, he could cripple Princess Raemina's ambitions to control the citizens even after she became Empress.

If he truly wanted, he could cripple the domestic market of the Martial Union.

If he truly wanted, he could cripple the Royal Army's low-level soldier count, having them boycott the army.

If he truly wanted, he could cripple all the corporations that constituted the Rafia Consortium by simply cutting away their domestic market and employees.

This was a power that terrified each and every single one of them. None of them could impact the others the way that Prince Raul could disembowel their entire faction.

Yet he didn't.

Not once did he employ his almost hypnotic control over the masses to cripple his competitors for the throne.

The reason was rather simple. It was not because of strategic considerations or tactical analysis. It was not because of geopolitical and economic reasons.

It was simple: the people who would be hurt the most if he executed these sabotages would be the people of Kandria and not the power blocs that he would be targeting.

Crippling those power blocs would mean crippling his citizens even more.

That was unacceptable to Raul Kandria. Thus, he never once employed his power to cripple his six competitors and try to leap for the throne even though there was a good chance that he could succeed.

Rui had been beyond overwhelmed by everything he heard about Raul Kandria. It was almost too good to be true.

There had to be a catch.

Perhaps his kindness was an elaborate facade, and he was a corrupt bastard underneath. Perhaps he was secretly exploiting all the people who loved him. Perhaps he was a narcissist who simply lusted for validation and attention.

Rui was almost certain that something like that is going on.

"You wish to meet Prince Raul?" Senior partner Kayla of Lambargeau Xavier Legal Services raised an eyebrow when he had gone to meet her, looking for a meeting with the prince.

"Yes," Rui replied, nodding. "He's finally returned from his endeavors to procure food imports for the impoverished during winter, right? I was hoping I could speak to him."

"Of course, you can," She replied. "His Highness speaks to everybody that seeks him. Everybody has a place in his heart."

Rui raised an eyebrow as he looked at her with an expression of skepticism and disbelief. He knew that the Beggar's Sect had wholeheartedly supported Prince Raul, yet he couldn't believe she was seriously saying something that cheesy and embarrassing unironically.

"...Uh huh. So where can I meet him?" Rui furrowed his eyebrow.

"Currently, he is situated in the shelter town of Varmaria, at the center of the nation," She replied. "Go there, and you shall be able to speed with him."

"...Ok."

Thankfully, the Beggar's Sect didn't charge him with anything for learning that piece of information. They were undoubtedly eager to pull Rui into the Raul Faction. Since, unlike the entire Kandrian Empire, the Beggar's Sect knew exactly what Rui was capable of.

They had watched as he singlehandedly annihilated the assassination industry of the Derschek Region.

They had watched as he singlehandedly shut down the Carnil Mafia in the Gereign Region. They knew that he was not someone that they would like as a foe or an enemy. It was best to secure him as an ally and make use of niche and powerful skills as a Martial Senior.

The shelter town of Varmaria was a town that had been created by the Kandrian Ruffians to house the bottom one percent of the most impoverished people. They supplied these people with not just food and housing but also employed them for basic manual labor. In this way, these impoverished people could not only be fed and housed but also earn their food and housing and become fully contributing members of society.

Everything that Rui had heard about it was quite good, although he had never actually visited it.

Traveling there didn't take more than fifteen minutes for someone as fast as him. He zipped through the sky, leaving sonic booms in his wake as he approached the shelter town of Varmaria.

"There it is," Rui spotted a collection of settlements and houses.

Yet just as he approached the town, two Martial Seniors appeared in his path, halting him.

"Name and purpose of visit," They sternly demanded.

On their Martial attire was the emblem of the Kandrian Ruffians.

"Rui Quarrier," He calmly complied, disregarding their reactions. "I am here for an audience with His Highness."

They glanced at each other before turning back to him. "...You may proceed. Do not activate your Martial Heart. It will be interpreted as a sign of hostility, and you will be dispatched with prejudice then and there. The shelter town is under deep surveillance and security while it homes His Highness."

Rui nodded wordlessly as the two Martial Senior guards let him pass, allowing him to enter the town gates.

He was quite surprised by how well the town was constructed. It was nothing extravagant, but it was clean and gave off a healthy impression.

He spotted a middle-aged man with golden hair, blue eyes, and dark skin sitting beneath a tree. His clothes were ordinary, the kind that most Kandrians wore. Several children leaned on him, sleeping peacefully as he petted their heads with affection and warmth.

Rui almost hesitated calling out to him, not wanting to disturb the peace and harmony that he seemed to radiate.

A serenity that one ought never to disturb.

He turned towards Rui with a welcoming smile. "You must be new here."

"Pray tell," His voice was warm and nurturing. "What is it that one with a hungering void within yourself seeks from a town of shelter?"

Chapter 1676: Hunger

Rui stared at him, puzzled.

It wasn't every day a stranger said that to him out of the blue.

"You know me?" Rui asked, raising an eyebrow.

The fact that he made some strange reference to the void when he saw him suggested that he may have recognized Rui.

"No," The man shook his head, smiling. "But I do know hunger when I see it. I have worked hard to assuage it my entire life, after all. Your hunger is deeper than that of anyone else I have ever seen."

He eyed Rui's muscular form. "Yet your hunger is not of food, clearly. It does not lie in your stomach. It is present deep within your eyes."

His bright, brilliant blue eyes, devoid of darkness, reflected the seemingly endless void of darkness that hid deep within Rui's eyes.

"...Uh huh," Rui stared at him with quizzical askance. "Say, where can I find the headquarters of the Kandrian Ruffians."

"At the center of the town," The man helpfully replied with a serene smile. "I hope you find what you're looking for."

"Thanks," Rui turned, heading straight into town.

He didn't think much of the encounter. Or the man who said strangely profound things. His eyes wandered about as he beheld the state of the people of the town. None of the citizens of the Varmaria seemed hungry or malnourished. If anything, their skin had a healthy luster. Their eyes had a glint of drive and hope. Most of the men seemed to be working manual labor for the construction and maintenance of the town, while women worked in large communal kitchens that prepared food for everybody in the town. He even saw agricultural plots eagerly tended to by plenty of people across the entire town. It had appeared that the town had taken on a bit of a communal approach so that everybody could help each other up from abject poverty.

That was a good approach as far as Rui was concerned. When survival and basic necessities were a struggle, coming together and pooling their efforts allowed them to accomplish things and overcome hurdles that they would never be able to do by themselves.

Once they reached a certain quality of lifestyle and security, they could think about liberalizing the town and establishing property rights and whatnot.

Regardless, his attention quickly turned to the center of the town. He hadn't come here to admire Varmaria.

"This must be it," He arrived at a multi-storied building at the center of the town where multiple roads converged. Admittedly, it was the most humble abode for a member of the royal family that he had ever seen. Princess Raemina, Ranea, Rafia, and Raijun lived in absolute luxury in comparison.

It appeared that the People's Prince did not mind a humble base.

"Purpose of Visit?" One of the guards asked him.

"I'm here to visit His Highness," Rui replied. "I was informed that High Highness accepted to meet all those that wished to meet him."

He didn't think Ms Kaylin was kidding about that part. "He does but...he's not in the office at the moment," The guards told him.

"Oh? Then where might I find him?"

"He's playing.

"Playing?" Rui tilted his head.

"He's playing with the children of Varmaria," The guard explained. "Most likely towards the southern gate."

"Playing with chil-" Rui paused, jerking his head with a surprised frown. Turning back to the southern gate that he had entered from. His senses could easily stretch to the end.

"Him?" Rui furrowed his eyebrows as he beheld the commoner middle-aged man patting sleeping children. "No way."

WHOOSH!

He swiftly disappeared, weaving through town at rapid paces, quickly reaching the southern gate.

STEP

He appeared before the dark-skinned blond man, killing the noise he generated with some heaven-bending.

"Hm?" The man smiled again as he noticed Rui. "That was rather quick. Have you found what you seek?"

"Not yet," Rui remarked, eying him more carefully. "What's your name?"

The man smiled wryly. "Can I offer a nickname?"

"Full name, please."

The man heaved an amused sigh. "My name is Raul Viva Kandria."

"Your Highness," Rui bowed lightly with an exasperated sigh.

"Please dispense with such meaningless gestures," Prince Raul's voice was resigned. "I am not befitting of them. I am but a simple commoner who one day discovered that the blood of the royal family flows in my veins. It is nothing special nor of note."

"You really should not be here without appropriate security, Your Highness," Rui heaved a troubled sigh as he massaged his temples.

"Oh, I try, but I am never truly without appropriate security," Raul chuckled. "It's hard to juke a Martial Master, you see. But they respect my wishes enough to protect me from afar. That is the best I can hope for."

He heaved a troubled sigh. "They are protective to a fault."

"It's common sense, Your Highness," Rui shook his head with resignation. The prince chuckled. "So, what is it that you seek from me?" Rui stared at him.

The prince simply met his gaze. His eyes were pure and sincere as he locked them against Rui's.

The contrast between their eyes was sharp. "What is it that you seek to achieve as prince?" Rui asked. The prince raised an eyebrow as his smile widened. "That's rather simple. I wish to create a nation that exists for its people, than a nation where its people exist for it."

His tone grew knowing. "I know what it is that you seek to understand, so I shall not hide it from you against the advice of my advisors. I intend to create a nation where Martial Artists are no longer elevated above the people. A nation can exist without Martial Artists, but it cannot exist without its people. Such a thing cannot and should not happen. Should I become Emperor, I would abolish the Kandrian Martial Pact, and the Kandrian Martial Covenant. That document, in my opinion, is the greatest sin of the founding emperor."

Chapter 1677: Hope

"That will cause a civil war," Rui narrowed his eyes. "The Martial Union will not stand for being disenfranchised in such a manner."

"I shall not allow a war to unfold," The prince shook his head as he slowly extricated himself from the various sleeping children. "A civil war would harm the people of this nation more than anybody else."

"Then..."

"The path forward in this difficult dilemma is rather simple," He smiled, walking towards Rui, putting his hand on Rui's shoulder. "What is your name?"

"Rui. Rui Quarrier."

"Walk with me, Rui Quarrier," He told him.

As they walked through town, the many residents lined up the streets, calling out to him with loving adoration. He painstakingly took the time to smile and wave at them individually.

Rui eyed him with an intrigued expression.

Unlike the other prince, he didn't have a hint or shred of royal bearing. His chest wasn't puffed, nor was his chin raised high. He didn't have a measure of arrogance in his body language or demeanor. Yet it was difficult to take one's eyes off him. He possessed a strange luster about him that drew one's attention. He seemed to glow with light as though his skin was bioluminescent, as though the Sun's rays bounced

off him harder and stronger than they did everything else. His mere presence was comforting and soothing.

His accepting, warm eyes conveyed welcoming love to everyone in the embrace of its gaze. A gaze that seemed to accept and forgive anybody and everybody it fixed on. It was as though any and everybody could find salvation in his grace.

Rui shook his head, putting aside such silly thoughts. He was here to evaluate the Prince's objectives as Emperor and whether they matched up with his own agendas.

"It must be tiring," His tone grew sympathetic as he directed a pained gaze. "To be bestowed with a mind such as yours."

"What?" Rui furrowed his eyebrows.

"You cannot help but think," The prince remarked. "About any and everything that captures your attention. Your mind cannot help but race into an endless chain of thoughts. It cannot help but furiously combust energy to sustain the sheer force of thought that undoubtedly drives forward your mind every second of every day of your life. You are unable to stop. You are unable to cease the torrents of thoughts that furiously ebb within the depths of your consciousness."

He paused, turning around as he faced Rui, standing before him.

His eyes were pained. His voice was ebbing with sorrow. "You cannot stop thinking. A storm of thoughts endlessly ravages your mind, never allowing it to settle in peace. Unable to exist in harmony. Unable to cease."

He shook his head. "It is not a curse I would wish upon anybody."

Rui's eyes widened with shock, shaken by the man's words. "...What?"

"I cannot help you harness the power of thought. That is something that you'll have to accomplish by yourself," The man remarked. "Perhaps it may be enough to assuage the hunger that rings in your eyes."

He turned back. "Come, let us head inside and speak in a more private setting."

Rui stared at him, startled. In all his life, he had regarded the double-evolved intellect that he had gained as a result of going through a second growth of mind when he had already been extremely gifted mentally, even in his previous life, as a gift. A boon. Never once had he considered it to be a curse. The thought had never once crossed his mind. It was so foreign that he was unable to even parse it.

He felt like somebody had just slapped him across the face.

His attention returned to the prince's figure as he entered the Kandrian Ruffian's main office in the town of Varmaria, where all the logistics of the town were maintained. Rui immediately followed him inside and through the various corridors until they wound up at a spacious but modest office.

"Have a seat," The prince smiled. "So where were we?"

"You said something about avoiding the civil war that your actions would cause," Rui remarked.

He didn't want to continue the conversation that had inadvertently begun after that.

The prince smiled knowingly. "Is that so? Hm. I do mean what I said. I will strive to create a nation where Martial Artists and people are equal. I will abolish the laws that unfairly favor Martial Artists at the cost of the safety and wellbeing of the people."

"And how exactly do you plan to go about that without causing a civil war with the Martial Union?" Rui raised an eyebrow. "By appealing to their better nature," The prince replied with a self-satisfied expression.

Rui stared at him with a confused expression. "Is that your attempt at a joke? You're bad at humor. Stick to being saintly."

"I was not joking, Rui Quarrier," The Prince heaved an exasperated sigh. "I shall personally speak to all the Martial Sages and Masters of the Martial Union. I hope that if we bear our hearts to each other, we can find a common path to the future."

Rui stared at him like he was a literal alien. "You have a rather elaborate and persistent sense of humor."

The prince was unperturbed by Rui's refusal to even acknowledge his words as legitimate. "I hope that my sincerity and love for them as citizens of Kandria and fellow human beings will be enough to convince them."

Rui stared at him with unadulterated bewilderment. Out of all the things that any prince and princess had ever uttered to him, this might have been the most absurd thing that Rui had ever heard. It put even Princess Ranea's ambition of creating a new age to shame as far as Rui was concerned. It was just so mind-bogglingly nonsensical that he was absolutely speechless. His voice failed him. He was unable to make even a single sound; he simply stared at Prince Raul like the man had just spontaneously combusted out of nowhere.

Chapter 1678: Who Are You?

Perhaps Prince Raul had been right. Perhaps Rui's thoughtful nature was overthoughtful and could sometimes be considered a curse.

If that was the case, then perhaps Prince Raul might have found a solution to it, making mind-numbingly stupid statements that absolutely stunned his mind into paralysis.

It was as though the sheer stupidity of the People Prince's game plan was so high that it had temporarily short-circuited Rui's brain.

He was unable to even parse a thought after the Prince explained his brilliant plan to prevent a civil war.

If this was a hypnotic technique, it would be a grade-ten technique. He doubted that even Master Zeamer had such a powerful hypnosis technique.

He simply sat in his seat, staring at the People's Prince with a vacant expression. A small part of him hoped that this was all an elaborate joke that the prince was pulling to mess with him.

Perhaps any second now he was going to get up and yell 'LMAO GOTCHA!', but the rest of him knew that that would not happen.

The People's Prince simply stared at him head-on with eyes brimming with sincerity and hope.

As well as certainty.

This prince was the most delusional member of the Royal Family.

At least they understood the gravity of their decision and that overcoming the fallout was not going to be easy and would require more than just idly sitting on a throne. They were prepared for what it took to become Emperor.

"...You are clinically insane," Rui managed to squeeze out.

The prince did not take any offense at those words. His smile saddened as he got up, leaning forward, putting a hand on Rui's shoulder.

His pure eyes conveyed an impression of warmth and comfort despite the shock his words had delivered. "Ah, my friend. For every ten people who call me a saint, there has always been one who calls me a madman. But..."

He shook his head. "I am neither a saint nor a madman. I am simply connected to my citizens, my people; I am simply connected to the suffering of life. Even to yours."

A deep sadness engulfed him as he beheld Rui. "Help me help you. The void in your soul is not something that any amount of power in this universe can satisfy. There will come a day when it will consume everything and, eventually, even you. You will never find peace."

His words weighed down on the world around him.

"You are able to satisfy it with the power that you supply it. Your astronomic growth as a Martial Artist is able to keep up with its demand. But that won't continue forever. Some day, you will not be able to satisfy that hunger. When that day comes, it will feed on you, instead, until you lose everyone and everything."

Rui was too mentally weak at that point, reeling from the shock of the Prince's political plans, to bother pushing back against the philosophical nonsense that the prince was spouting. "And what would you have me do?"

"Not even an endless universe will assuage the hunger of your ambition," The prince's voice took on a sagely luster. "Look inward, not outward."

His eyes bore into Rui's. "Who are you?"

Rui's eyes widened.

"What?"

The prince smiled mysteriously. "You don't seem to be too aware of why you are hungry."

Rui raised an eyebrow. "I know where my ambition comes from."

"And where would that be? What caused such a deep hunger?" The prince asked.

Rui stared at him. "A famous quote. From a great martial artist."

"A great martial artist?"

"The greatest."

His declaration was firm.

"I see," The prince smiled warmly. "Rather strange, don't you think?"

Rui raised an eyebrow. "What is?"

"A famous quote resulting in a drive so powerful it propelled you to the youngest in the Senior Realm," Prince smiled. "Why do you think that happened?"

Rui stared at him.

His expression grew immersed.

"A famous quote, you said," The prince continued. "If it's famous. Then surely others have heard of it."

"Most certainly."

"Did all of them develop the endlessly hungry void that I see within you?" The prince asked.

Rui's eyes widened. "...No. Not a single one of them."

"I wonder why," The prince remarked knowingly. "Why it is that while everybody else who heard this quote went about their day like it was any other, but in you...In you, it birthed a void that may very well consume this entire world."

He gazed deep into Rui's eyes. "I wonder why."

"...Yeah," Rui's eyes swam around.

The man smiled as he patiently waited for Rui to finish his thoughts.

Rui glanced up at the prince with a refreshed expression.

He recalled what Ms Kayla had told him about Prince Raul.

'He simply does what he will...and people follow him of their own free will.'

'You should meet him, then you'll understand.'

Rui was able to see why the people of this nation were devoted to him. He possessed a magnetic aura. One that drew people in.

He soothed their pain, their anguish. He gave them hope. He cried in their pain and rejoiced in their joy.

"You...are special," Rui remarked.

Yet his eyes narrowed. "Yet you are unfit for the throne."

The prince smiled sadly. "You may very well be right. Yet, in this world, we can only do what we believe we ought to. I am driven down my path as you are yours. I pray it leads you where you hope it will, but my heart fears it won't."

He stretched a hand out to Rui.

"If you take my hand, I can promise to be there for you," The prince offered. "I don't know how much I can help, but I always strive to live up to those who place their trust in me."

Rui considered it for a moment before shaking his head. "The Martial Path is a solitary path. You cannot help me. Good luck with the Kandrian Throne War."

Rui got up, leaving the office and, eventually, the town.

Chapter 1679: Choiceless

For the first time in a long time, Rui felt depressed. He heaved a sigh, heading home. There wasn't much that he could do, considering that he had made contact with all seven factions and directly contacted six of the seven candidates for the throne.

He wasn't sure what there was left to do. At this point, he could only hope to grow stronger so that by the time the Kandrian Emperor died and the cold war immediately heated into an active one, he would have the power to protect his family.

A war was incoming, and if he couldn't stop it or find a favorable side to take, then he best ensured that he grew strong enough to protect his family.

However, there were some things that he needed to take care of before he could do that.

'The annual fiscal meeting will start soon,' Rui realized. It had been a year since it occurred last time, shortly after he returned to the Kandrian Empire before he made his choice to plant seeds of his Martial Sect.

It was time for yet another fiscal budget allocation meeting. This time, a motion to instate Rui as a member of the Fiscal Committee would be raised, and hopefully, Rui could get enough support. Once he was done with that, he could raise the motion to secure a budget for the dissemination of his Martial Art.

Once that was done, he could pretty much kick back and relax.

'Though the budget regarding my future sect will probably come much later in the meeting,' Rui realized. The way the meeting worked was a little strange and different from what Rui had expected. It wasn't as though different drafts of budget allocations were proposed, nominated, and then finally voted on.

This voting session would continue for many rounds until it covered all major allocations. After that, the various research and development departments could choose how to spend the budget allocations themselves.

Rui found it curious that no Martial Sage took part in this little meeting. Perhaps this wasn't worth their time. Perhaps they had enough self-awareness and cognizance to realize that their presence would skew things too much in the favor of their sects and other important fields of Martial Art would be disenfranchised.

Frankly, he found it a pain. But he decided to bear through it.

In the meantime, it was time to continue through with his four domain techniques. They were coming along nicely.

He was especially looking forward to the final version of Malevolent Kitchen. He immediately headed to the Jrava Mountain Range, looking forward to training. He just wanted to immerse himself in training and forget about the gross mess of the Kandrian Throne War. He was really frustrated and resentful of the seven prime princes and princesses. Why did each of them have to be extreme in their own ways? Why couldn't there be any reasonably powerful prince or princess?

There were other princes and princesses. Yet they were so insignificant that neither the Martial Union nor the Beggar's Sect felt the need to even acknowledge their existence in the information that they had prepared for Rui. It meant that there was no point in even talking to them. Rui did not live in a fantasy world; he was a pragmatic man for the most part. Perhaps he could be one of the prime princes or the other an edge over their peers, but he could not close the titanic gap between nobody-princes and princesses and the seven prime candidates.

He shook his head, removing the matter from his head entirely. Weeks passed by as he immersed himself in training with Master Gurren, fulfilling his tutoring obligations with Prince Raijun, and training Master Gurren to master the telescope domain technique that he had prepared for him. The Master had made considerable progress and was on the cusp of mastering it, much to his delight.

These three matters consumed his entire time for the most part, allowing him to fully hone in on what he needed to do to grow stronger as a Martial Senior and take more steps towards the next Realm and Project Water.

Soon enough, the annual fiscal allocation meeting had finally arrived.

Chapter 1680: Arrived

The day had finally arrived. Rui felt particularly electric about this than he did a meeting with any of the princes and princesses. Compared to those psychopaths, the Martial Masters of the Martial Union had earned his respect to a far greater degree.

These were beings who had ascended human limitation in both mind and body. They had mastered body, heart, and mind and reached a truly astonishing level of power. They were so powerful that lesser beings simply weren't qualified to behold their Martial Art. Those who did would suffer damage to their mind by virtue of the force of hypnosis passively inflicted on them by the Martial Mind.

They truly earned his admiration, and today, he would be facing almost each and every single Master of the Martial Union as they would decide whether he was worthy to take a seat among them and whether his Martial Art had potential for the future.

"Nervous?" Master Ceeran smirked at Rui as they headed to the Vargard national headquarters of the Martial Union.

"I would be lying if I was not nervous at all," Rui heaved a soft sigh. "The Martial Masters of the Martial Union are an enormous source of power for the Martial Union."

It was thanks to them that the Martial Union was feared. Each and every single one of them possessed the power to bring ruin upon entire geopolitical regions that did not have Martial Masters like the Kaddar Region or the Derschek Region. The Martial Union had nearly a hundred and ten of the hundred and fifty Martial Masters that existed in the Kandrian Empire. Of the hundred and ten, only a hundred actually regularly partook in the annual fiscal budget allocation meeting.

Masters like Master Gurren simply didn't care about it and stayed away from it altogether.

"Don't be too nervous," Master Ceeran patted him on his back. "None of them are going to try and bully you. It is generally deeply frowned upon for a Martial Master to needlessly bully Martial Artists of the

Lower Realms without adequate cause or in retaliation or self-defense. Within the Martial Union and internationally."

"Well, that hasn't stopped them before," Rui replied as he thought about Master Krakule and Master Haishi. "Relax, while there are outliers for everything, the vast majority are not willing to sabotage their reputation for light reasons. It would be no different from the condemnation an adult beating up a child would receive," Master Ceeran reassured him.

"Good, then let us be on our way."

They smoothly bypassed all the security check-ins and troublesome matters, swiftly heading in as they met up with even more Martial Masters.

Master Vericita petted him lightly while Headmaster Aronian smiled warmly. Even Master Krakule gave him a curt nod.

They entered a large meeting hall deep inside the Martial Union with a thick array of seats in a circle around a central speaker's podium. Behind them were even more empty seats that Master Ceeran pointed him to.

"You are a committee nominee, which is why you shall have to sit there until you are voted in or leave if the votes are insufficient," Master Ceeran told him.

Rui nodded, obediently taking his seat as he tried ignoring the gazes and attention of various Martial Masters.

It was unnerving because he knew that each and every single one of them had the power to eviscerate him despite his greatest resistance. He was not used to feeling so disarmed in a room full of people. Every day that passed, the number of martial seniors that could defeat him in a battle was reduced.

He turned his attention back to the assembly hall. Martial Masters came in, often in groups, taking their seats.

Rui recognized more than he had expected. There were the ones that he was already acquainted and friendly with, but he also recognized some of the bodyguards of the princes and princesses that he had spoken to.

He even recognized the poison and symbiotic Martial Masters that were with Prince Raijun. They simply glanced at him momentarily before taking their seats in the assembly. The Martial Masters definitely behaved more clique-like than he was expecting, but it allowed him to get a good view of the dynamics of the various major and minor sects that would be competing for resources in the Martial Union.