

## **Martial Unity 341**

### Chapter 341: Clash

"I think... we might not die today." The head researcher shook his head.

Subject SQ007 had been woken up, briefed and dispatched. There was a set of loud terrifying explosions later before silence reigned again.

The surviving researchers were too terrified to leave the confined of their little hideout, but they had begun to suspect that perhaps the job was done.

After all, she was a Martial Squire. There was no way she would lose to Martial Apprentices. The researchers were well aware of her shortcomings and drawbacks. She did not possess a single Squire-level Martial Art technique, only the Apprentice-level techniques that were no longer compatible with her. Furthermore, she had only very recently completed her breakthrough and wasn't too familiar with the power of a Martial Squire.

Still.

She was a Martial Squire.

There was no way she would not win easily.

Right?

"Not unless there's an extraordinary grade-ten Martial Apprentice with an unbelievable Martial Art..." He pondered, before shaking his head.

There was no way that could happen.

Suddenly;

RUMBLE!

"Woah!"

The very facility began shaking as the researchers fell to the ground losing their balance, scrambling fear.

"What is happening?!"

On the other end of the facility, a horrifying conflict had commenced.

BOOM!

WHOOSH

She had crossed the distance between her and Rui in the smallest of instances. Her body twisted as she generated unprecedented power into an attack.

The very air shivered in fear as she launched a devastating attack.

Yet, to her surprise;

WHOOSH

Rui managed to evade her attack.

A combination of prediction based on center of gravity and distance analysis, Primordial Instinct, four maneuvering techniques and one breathing technique just barely allowed him to avoid the attack cleanly.

Yet, she wasn't done.

BAM!

A swift speedy kick swung at him.

BOOM!

He grimaced as he skidded backwards, barely managing to guard in time. She immediately lashed out after him, swinging yet another attack when;

POW!

An invisible attack landed on her face, affecting her fragile balance.

Kane had tried to throw her off.

Her eyes immediately shifted to Kane despite the Void Step technique. Yet before she could even land an attack;

BAM!

Nel had caught up, landing a kick on her.

Soon Fae and Hever immediately arrived, trying to prevent her from focusing on Rui.

Every single one of the Martial Artists were clear on one thing; Rui was the key to the battle.

The Martial Squire thought so merely because he was clearly the strongest among them. That was true, certainly, yet the Martial Apprentices knew something about him that she didn't.

Rui grew stronger the longer a fight prolonged.

The more data he had access to, the more accurate and precise the predictive model was. The stronger his adaptive evolution was.

Whatever happened, they needed to prolong the battle for as long as possible and ensure Rui was as good a shape as possible.

They had an immense amount of faith in his prowess.

WHOOSH

Rui barely managed to avoid yet another attack, yet he was left wide open.

The Martial Squire lashed out to exploit the opportunity, aiming to kill him with a powerful blow in that moment.

Yet;

POW!

BAM!

Kane and Nel had just barely managed to intervene in time, launching powerful and swift blows at her vitals.

She blocked both of them, irritated.

Her expression alone sent shivers down their spine.

"RARGH!" She snarled as she flung them away, yet before she could even turn back to Rui.

BAM!!!

A tremendous blow landed on her arm.

Her eyes widened as Fae's single most powerful attack had just barely managed to bruise her flesh, pushing her away as she skidded away.

CLASP

Hever caught her arm. His extreme muscle memory activated as it furiously executed the improved Meteor Swing technique.

BOOM!!

The facility shook as he did his best to swing the Squire with as much power as he could.

"Insignificant."

The gravitas of her voice shook him as he felt boundless pressure paralyzing him.

She was unharmed.

BAM!!

He grimaced, coughing blood, as a swift kick propelled him across the facility.

She glared at Fae as she lashed out at her. Yet before her strike could reach;

CLASP

Rui had caught her shoulder.

WOBBLE

Her body stumbled as Rui activated Flow Flux at the last moment.

WHOOSH

The strike she threw missed Fae due to Rui's sabotage.

Her balance was more fragile than it normally would be because she wasn't accustomed to it. She had not developed the muscle memory of active balance maintenance for her new body. Thus, Flow Flux was especially effective on her.

She turned to Rui with a murderous glare as she charged him, looking for a takedown. She would be able to crush him in ground grappling.

Rui's eyes widened in fear as she reached him.

POW!

BAM!

Extremely swift and powerful strikes aimed at her vitals from Nel and Kane intercepted her yet again. They had managed to recover and return back just in time, yet they were far from okay. Even if her power was far below that of a normal Squire, she was still devastatingly powerful.

BAM!

Nel coughed blood as her elbow crashed into his ribs, he collapsed, losing consciousness.

WHOOSH

Kane barely evaded an attack as he escaped with his powerful evasive maneuvering.

BOOM!!

Fae landed another powerful attack on her. Yet the Squire simply withstood the attack as she swiftly turned around and blasted Fae with a powerful swing.

BAM!

Fae crashed into a wall, falling down unconscious. A single strike had taken her out of commission.

Only Rui and Kane were left.

It was a despairing outcome.

Rui closed his eyes.

"Don't wish to look death in the eyes?" She asked. "Understandable."

She lashed out, launching a straightforward strike.

Yet in that moment, a profound change had occurred.

One that wasn't beyond her senses.

But certainly beyond her understanding.

WHOOSH

BAM!

She gasped as he cleanly danced past her attack, landing a powerful Flowing Canon into her chest.

His attack collided into her bare chest as their combined power fueled the collision.

She leapt away, retreating for the first time as she glanced at Rui warily. ('...Something is wrong.')

Rui finally opened his eyes. His dark eyes locked with hers as she felt a strange profound pressure from his gaze.

His eyes pierced passed her body, as though she were transparent.

She felt naked, even more so than she already was.

"You... You need to die." She murmured. She instinctively felt she could not allow him to stay alive any longer.

Chapter 342: Couldn't

Throughout the fight, Rui had wondered.

How hadn't they lost yet?



She was a Martial Squire, was she not?

What exactly was happening?

Based on the power and speed she had displayed the first time when she had missed, she should have been able to mangle them with just a few attacks, if not one.

Yet when she fought the second time, she was noticeably inferior.

Rui had been able to dodge her attack, as had Kane. Nel had been able to withstand her attack without losing consciousness the first time, although he did the second time.

It was only after a few exchanges that Rui understood.

('She's given up on using techniques entirely.')

Her proficiency with her body was sub-optimal, adding on top of that incompatible Apprentice-level techniques and these two elements sabotaged her accuracy too much.

She could not fix the proficiency with her body on the spot, that would require a lot of time, experience, and training. But she could get rid of the incompatible techniques sabotaging her accuracy.

But only if she stopped using them entirely.

It was a tough choice. But ultimately, she chose control over raw power, as a good Martial Artist would.

Once she stopped using incompatible techniques, her power dipped well below the Squire Realm, but her accuracy and precision had risen.

Once Rui realized this, he realized that maybe, just maybe, victory wasn't too far-fetched.

But only if they used everything they had. Throughout the fight, he watched her like a hawk. He documented everything about her.

Every twitch.

Every shift.

Every attack.

Every block.

All of it.

Large volumes of information entered his Mind Palace as he watched her toying with his friends with gritted teeth.

Watching his friends suffer to prolong the battle for his sake made him feel unparalleled rage.

He was almost there.

So close.

He closed his eyes.

"Don't wish to look death in the eyes?" She had asked. "Understandable."

Just then, he heard a click in his mind.

The final piece had finally fallen in place.

He was ready.

('Straight right blitz punch; 100%')

WHOOSH

BAM!

Rui executed the most accurate and perfect counter to the maneuver as he adapted to her attack with the help of the adaptive evolution model.

She was struck with effectively both of their power combined, yet she didn't suffer more than a graze.

It was then that Rui recalled she was a defensive Martial Artist. The reason she was fighting aggressively was that there was a huge gap in physical parameters between her and them individually. If she was fighting against an equal, she would likely revert to her defensive style.

On paper, it should have been easy for her to win.

Yet, some time had passed since the fight began and for some reason, none of them were dead yet.

Rui could feel that Nel, Fae, and Hever were still alive through their seismic signatures. Yet their conditions angered him.

He intended to vent it out on her.

"You... You need to die." She glowered at him.

Rui didn't even bother exchanging words.

The very air contorted under the weight of his bloodlust. It was almost as if his desire to kill her was warping the environment itself. She widened her eyes as she experienced a mental pressure that exceeded that of anything she had ever felt of a Martial Apprentice.

She felt fear for the first time since stepping into the Squire Realm.

And then she felt shame.

How dare a mere Martial Apprentice humiliate her?

"You... You will die."

The very land beneath them shook as she mangled it, pushing it back as she propelled herself forward at a speed that beggared the imagination.

The atmosphere wailed woefully as she tore it apart with every movement.

Yet.

WHOOSH

Rui avoided.

It took a combination of the prediction and adaptive models the VOID algorithm, Primordial Instinct, and five Apprentice-level techniques.

But he avoided it nonetheless.

BAM!!

His elbow crashed into her chest with a titanic collision fueled by both their power.

Yet, she didn't so much as blink. She unfurled a flurry of strikes at him, the power of each strike was beyond even Fae, even what Squire Kyrie had struck him with, even beyond what the blond bandit had hit him with.

Yet, they crashed into empty air as Rui fainted away.

He could tell that an aggressive offense was not something she was comfortable with. On top of that, she was still not accustomed to her new body.

Her movements had flaws and inefficiencies you would not normally see in a Martial Artist. These flaws made it easier for Rui to predict her. It was part of the reason he was coping well.

Yet he was doing merely just that; coping.

Winning was still a herculean task with abysmal difficulty. His attacks did not faze her, she was a defensive Martial Artist. Even Fae's Whirlpool attack had only managed to bruise her, despite the fact that the Squire wasn't using any techniques. Her raw durability and constitution were above Fae's lethality.

That alone meant none of Rui's attacks could really hurt her. He doubted even the Stinger would put more than a scratch on her flesh.

Even a Stinger to the eyes likely wouldn't threaten her life.

He alone couldn't defeat her.

He could feel it.

The VOID algorithm wasn't omnipotent. It allowed him to cope by predicting his opponent beforehand instead of reacting after and allowed him to respond with just the counter that increased his probability of winning the most.

But it wasn't enough.

The VOID algorithm allowed him to cope, but it could not do more for him. Its existing shortcomings and flaws in addition to Rui's own limitations were too shackling.

Time passed as the disadvantages snowballed. His inferior speed, power, stamina as well as health. They all worked against him.

Every attack she occasionally managed to land hurt him significantly. Every attack he landed bounced off of her. A quasi-Squire level defense was beyond even his capabilities, he was an all-rounder, not an offensive specialist.

THUD

He fell to one knee.

He was bleeding profusely.

The world spun as he felt momentary dizziness.

STEP

She arrived, pausing.

She savored the moment. She stretched her right arm back, drawing vast amounts of power from her core.

Rui knew he wouldn't be able to survive that attack.

He couldn't defeat her.

"Goodbye, little Apprentice."

Her eyes narrowed.

It was time.

The very world mourned as she unleashed her attack.

BOOM!

Chapter 343: Profound

He couldn't defeat her, not by himself, at the very least.

But he didn't need to.

He wasn't fighting alone.

BOOM!

A powerful invisible collision crashed into her head, rocking her body. It threw her attack off-course, missing Rui by just a few millimeters.

Fae and Nel appeared out of nowhere, latching onto her arms in arm-bars with their whole bodies, doing their best to restrain her movements.

Her reactions were heavily delayed due to her surprise and confusion.

She felt an invisible force grabbing her shoulder and chest; Hever.

Rui grinned at the sight. ('Kane, you mad lad, you actually succeeded.')

Kane had healed all of them with the healing potions that they each carried while Rui kept the Squire busy. He then carried them over while using the Void Step technique. Theoretically, Void Step wasn't limited hard to a single person. However, in practice, it was extremely difficult to expand it beyond one's self.

Yet, Kane's mastery and fortitude allowed him to succeed in doing just that for three people. He appeared out of thin air a few moments later, collapsing to the ground, exhausted. He would not be able to fight anymore for the time being.

Yet he had already done more than enough. He had dispelled defeat and given them another chance, it was more than Rui could expect from him.

Not even a moment had passed since they appeared. Hever's extreme muscle memory flashed as it activated the improved Meteor Swing technique in the briefest of moments. He elevated her over his head before plummeting her down headfirst at incredible speeds. Fae and Nel coiled on her as though their lives depended on it. In a way, it did depend on it. Their legs coiled around her neck and head, holding both in place.

Yet, even as she plummeted headfirst, she wasn't afraid. She had already withstood this attack unharmed earlier. The other two Martial Apprentices were not hurting her, just momentarily restraining her.

She was vulnerable momentarily, yes. But she did not think it could be exploited, Hever's motions were too fast for any kind of coordinated attack. She had already decided to kill them all the second she landed.



That was when she heard it.

PEW!

A whistling sound, as if something sharp were cutting through the air at high speeds.

It was only after that she realized what it was.

Her eyes widened as the world turned in her vision and she saw a foot flying straight toward her head, its thumb-toe aiming straight up at her eye as she plummeted toward it.

Neither the chaos, his tumultuous emotions, nor his physical condition.

None of it.

None of it had been able to prevent Rui Quarrier from ceasing the dimmest light of hope that had appeared in front of him.

The Squire wouldn't have believed Rui had he told her that none of this was coordinated beforehand.

Fae and Nel simply used their power to hinder her. They were too weak to fight her head-on, as much as Nel hated to admit that.

As for Hever?

He didn't even need to think.

He literally had only one technique in his arsenal. In all that time, he hadn't mastered a single other technique.

At the very moment they'd appeared, there was chaos in Rui's mind. He did not know what he ought to have done.

If he did nothing, they would all die.

If he did what he had already done, they would all die.

What should he do?

If only there was a way to figure out the best decisio-

"...!"

A thundering realization flashed in his mind.

Rui's dark pupils dilated.

Time itself slowed down to a crawl.

His eyes widened.

The best part about the Mind Palace technique was that it never forgot.

No matter what he put in it, no matter how long ago.

('I have a predictive model for all of them in Mind Palace at this very moment.') He had realized, looking at the four Martial Artists before him.

What if he used four predictive models instead of one? What if accurately used all four models to peer into the future?

To gaze deeper and sharper into the future than he ever had?

And input that into the adaptive model to figure out the best move for that particular moment?

Predicting all of their movements would be no different from seeing the very future itself!

At that moment, his mind had violently rampaged into a frenzy through his Mind Palace. The Mind Palace shook as he had extracted the predictive model, inputting the parameters like a madman as he had watched Fae and Nel latch onto the Squire's arms, as he had watched Hever grab her shoulder and chest.

His eyes narrowed as he predicted the future with the power of four predictive models. The adaptive model of the VOID algorithm hastily swallowed the data up and instantly, the result was out.

It was objectively the best move possible in that scenario. Nothing else could give Rui a higher likelihood of victory.

Yet the likelihood of victory was still small.

It was up to him.

Their fate, their future, their lives. He bore the burden.

It was heavy.

It was painful.

It was fearful

Yet, he strived forward.

Eyes closed.

The mildest of smiles cracked on his face.

Despite the pressure.

Despite the fear.

Despite the pain.

He smiled.

PEW!

The Stinger whistled as it cut through the air!

Rui delicately maintained the trajectory, correcting and refining it as it flew upwards.

If it was off by even the slightest millimeter and the slightest millisecond, the plan would fail and they were all as good as dead.

Yet, even if it was inhumanly accurate, victory was not assured. He could only do his best and pray.

But pray to whom?

Fate?

Science?

His idol Bruce Lee?

The God that had reincarnated him in a different world?

Rui prayed to all of them.

Who knew? Maybe that would be the difference between life and death.

PEW!

He would soon find out.

#### Chapter 344: Outcome

The Frontal Lobe of the brain, as the name suggested, was the foremost part of the brain. It was responsible for conscious cognition as a whole.

It also happened to be the part of the brain that was closest to the eyeball and the eye sockets.

The distance between the opening of the eye socket and the Frontal Lobe of the brain was shorter than Rui's big toe. In a hypothetical scenario, if his toe were to enter a human eye socket at precisely the right angle and location, it would pierce the brain.

That had always been the most lethal option Rui had, from the very start. Yet he lost the first time despite possessing it.

What made this time all that different?

For one, her incredible active and passive defenses were no longer all that invulnerable.

Fae and Nel were using their tremendous power to seal her arms and shackle her neck and head in place.

As for her passive defense, her remarkable constitution wasn't particularly all that relevant here.

The only thing in between the Stinger and her brain was her eyeball and her eyelid.

Yet, previously, even this had been demonstrably enough. Rui could barely hurt her flesh. He did not think the Stinger alone could penetrate to her brain.

Yet, what was different this time was that the Stinger wasn't alone this time.

Although it propelled forward with the same power and speed it usually did, the difference was that its target was propelling towards it at remarkably high speeds and momentum.

Hever had grown far stronger in the past nine months since the Martial Contest.

He had added minor elements of other techniques to the Meteor Swing technique. Elements of breathing and muscle techniques to amplify power and speed. Elements of mental techniques to amplify his mind in a few different ways, conditioning techniques to amplify his grip.

It had taken him a long time to incorporate these elements into the Meteor Swing technique. But once he succeeded, the grade of the technique as a whole had risen.

It was no longer merely a grade-nine technique. It had stepped above the ninth grade and had slowly begun to approach grade ten.

It was a quasi-grade-ten technique.

That was the difference.

She struggled, but Fae and Nel coiled tighter and tighter. As strong as she was, she had no Squire-level techniques and was unaccustomed to her power. Not even a Martial Squire could overwhelm the many high-grade techniques that Fae used across her entire body to shackle her. It didn't help that Nel was outputting a power that wasn't too far off either. Even if she was slowly overwhelming them, she wouldn't make it in time.

Every time she shifted, Rui almost reflexively readjusted the Stinger's trajectory, refining the aim with Primordial Instinct.

Time was up.

She closed her eye, hoping her Squire-level constitution would hold.

The Stinger crashed into her eyelid.

The verdict would soon be delivered.

The sheer net power of the quasi-grade-ten Meteor Swing in combination with the Stinger, Flame Breathing, Outer Convergence, and Adamant Reforging pushed against her eyelid through the sharp toe.

...

SPLAT!!!

All that pressure.

All that fear.

All that pain.

All of it melted away as he saw a splurt of blood erupt from her eye. Her eyelid hadn't even withstood the attack for more than a millisecond. The sheer combined power it had been subjected to far exceeded the Apprentice Realm.

Had she possessed even a single Squire-level defensive technique, her eyelid would have emerged unscathed.

But she didn't.

And thus, it hadn't.

His elation erupted as his toe pushed deeper and deeper into her skull. But he controlled his emotion as he heightened his senses. If the trajectory was off by even a bit, the damage would not be critical.

The Martial Squire would quickly crush them all. A single missing eye would not be enough to give them a win.

BAM!

The toe had gone as deep as it could, and his foot had banged into her head.

BOOM!

The Meteor Swing had been completed.

Fae, Nel, and Hever widened their eyes, they had only just seen Rui after the attack had ended. Without techniques like Primordial instinct and the VOID algorithm, they simply had been completely unaware of what Rui had done.



Yet Rui ignored their reactions.

He didn't know the outcome.

Yet, he didn't care.

"RARGH!"

BOOM!

BOOM!

BOOM!

He snarled as he began slamming her head over and over with drop-kicks and soccer kicks.

If the plan had failed, then he at least needed to inflict as much damage as he could. Blunt force trauma, increased blood loss, and hopefully even a concussion.

He could feel her powerful heart still beating through Seismic Mapping. He didn't give a fuck whether the plan had succeeded or not anymore.

He was not going to stop until either she died or she got up and they died.

His friends had absolutely no idea what just happened. In their eyes, Rui had just somehow appeared out of nowhere.

Yet they realized the gravity of the situation and joined in.

Seconds passed.

BOOM!

BOOM!

...

BOOM!

Minutes passed.

BOOM!

THUD

Rui stumbled back and fell.

His vision was blurring, his muscles lost power.

He lost too much blood.

"Huff... Huff... Huff..." He got back up weakly, raising his leg to kick.

"Rui." Kane called out to him.

BOOM!

"Rui!" Kane insisted.

He paused glancing at him.

He turned straight to the ground.

He followed his gaze.

A large pool of blood and cerebral fluid had formed from the head of the unmoving body of the Martial Squire.

"It's over." He said. "We won."

He knew that.

But the sheer paranoia coupled with his disoriented mind propelled him forward.

Now that reality had been forced onto him, he fell to the ground exhausted. "...Holy fuck."

He cursed.

He still found it extraordinarily hard to believe.

It was surreal.

To think that despite how horrendous the odds were, they still somehow managed to pull through.

He shook his head. "What a world."

Chapter 345: Completion

They were all silent for a while, trying to process the fact that they were still alive. Rui appeared calm and relaxed but in reality, his mind was a maelstrom of chaos.

('Holy shit, we beat a Martial Squire.') His eyes widened as the full gravity of their situation dawned on him. ('The Martial Union is going to go nuts when they learn about this.')

Still, the context made the situation less absurd. The Martial Squire they were facing was nerfed and shackled in several ways.

If she had been given even a month of training and even a single Squire-level technique of the weakest grade, she would have crushed them.

Rui recalled how weak he was when he first broke into the Apprentice Realm. Back then, he hadn't mastered even a single Apprentice-level technique. Any Martial Apprentice could casually toy with him with Apprentice-level techniques.

The Martial Squire was in a similar situation with the Squire Realm.

('No, her predicament was even worse.') Rui shook his head. ('At least I didn't have a new body to get accustomed to.')

If she didn't have those handicaps...

Rui sighed. "We have a mission to complete. Let's get going."

The others stirred, before nodding.

"Where's the grade-ten Martial Apprentice?" Nel asked, scratching his head.

Rui turned towards him. "That was the grade-ten Martial Apprentice."

Nel's eyes widened. "She broke through to the Squire Realm?!"

"Yeah." Rui nodded. "Thanks to this facility. It was almost certainly set up to research the breakthrough to the Squire Realm and they very recently succeeded. She must have been a Squire candidate." Rui said. "That's why the Martial Union sent us to destroy it and the researchers. They must have learned of its existence and location fairly recently."

He turned towards the other end of the facility. "There are a few more researchers alive, we'll extract the research data from them as planned, kill them, and set out. We don't have too much more time."

They all nodded, before heading in deeper.

Finding the hidden researchers didn't take any time at all. Their seismic signatures were loud and clear to Rui.

"I know you speak the international dialect." He told them. "Where are the research logs? I want all of them."

The researchers simply stared at them in shock, before one of them managed to choke out a question. "What happened to the Martial Squire?"

"The logs. Now." He exerted some mental pressure on them. They quickly scurried before procuring two sets of large boxes.

"Is this truly all there is?"

"Y-Yes!" The head researcher gulped. "That's everything from the inception of the research facility till today!"

Primordial Instinct could sense earnestness hidden beneath all the fear.

Rui opened the boxes as he began skimming through all the documents, hastily storing the precious research data in his Mind Palace.

"What are you doing?" Kane asked in the Kandrian dialect.

"Verifying the research data." He lied.

"Really?" Kane peered at him suspiciously. "Even though you can't read Vinfronese?"

"There are other ways to verify whether these are, in fact, legitimate documents or just some nonsense," Rui replied. "You wouldn't want to return home with a bunch of documents about the sanitation logistics of the research facility instead of the research data we seek, right?"

"No." Kane admitted.

"It won't take long." Rui told them.

Rui intended to memorize all the data. He was truly curious about the research that the facility had engaged in. For now, as Kane said, he couldn't understand a word of what was written. But if he learned to read Vinfronese, then he would have access to all this research data on the breakthrough to the Squire Realm!

This would surely be beneficial to him in the long run.

Normal Martial Artists did not possess the background in mathematics and science to understand even a single page of the research documents but that was not true for Rui. Rui had come from a world with a far superior scientific and research foundation. He himself possessed an extremely rich background in research. As long as he could understand the language, he should be able to make some significant gains from all the research.

The only problem was his lack of understanding of esoteric technology based on all the wondrous esoteric phenomena in this world.

('I can get Julian to help me out.') Rui smirked. As long as Julian aided him with the more fantastical parts of the research that were unique to the world of Gaia, he would have no problem understanding the core of what was happening and what exactly Martial Squires were in the first place.

Ten minutes later. He had skimmed through all the documents, having memorized everything.

BAM!

He gave them a painless death.

"They're legit." He said, nodding. "Let's get going."

"Finally!" Nel exclaimed, elated. "This was getting boring!"

They grabbed the boxes, heading towards the elevator.

"We're taking that as well." Rui gestured to the corpse of the Martial Squire.

"Why?" Fae frowned.

"There's a chance that our story sounds too hard to believe." Rui told them. "The part where five Martial Apprentices from the Academy defeating a Martial Squire, that is. Even if they believe that the research facility managed to crack the secret to the Squire Realm based on the data we are procuring, it may not be enough to corroborate our story of how we took the Squire down. They may suspect a number of other circumstances outside of our merits. Taking her body is absolute irrefutable proof of our story."

Rui took off the outer garments of his uniform, clothing the naked corpse before lifting it and tying it to his back. "There."

Soon, they set out.

Rui grabbed the mission tracking device before hitting the button that indicated the successful completion of the mission. The Martial Union would now be aware of the success of their operation. All they had to do was return.

A grin broke out on Rui's face. He couldn't wait to see their faces when they realized what they had accomplished.

#### Chapter 346: Spread

The post-mission wing of Martial Union headquarters was large. It had to be, after all. Many, many missions were completed every day and each mission had post-mission protocols that needed to be completed. The Martial Union needed to procure reports and statements from the Martial Artists before official confirmation could be provided.

A lot of Martial Artists returning from missions usually gathered in the wide wing as they handled the final protocols after the mission ended.

The wing was divided into different sections for different Martial Realms, each Realm of Martial Artists had its own dedicated post-mission facility.

That was why all the Martial Apprentices in the Apprentice post-mission facility were surprised when they felt the faintest Squire-level aura in the facility.

That was strange.

They all frowned.

Squire-level Martial Artists were not supposed to be in the Apprentice post-mission facility.

What was even more strange was that it was muffled. As though someone had snuffed it. Yet, they could sense it. It was unmistakable, every Martial Apprentice knew the aura of a Martial Squire quite well, after all.



Yet, when they turned around to see what was happening, they only saw five Martial Apprentices walking towards them. None of them were emanating the faint Squire-level. No. Instead, the Squire-level aura came from a bandaged corpse that one of the Martial Apprentices dragged along the floor.

It took them a few seconds to process.

Corpse. Squire-level aura. Martial Apprentices.

The entire facility froze. Every Martial Apprentice stared at them with bewildered shock and confusion.

The one carrying the corpse had strange hair and strange eyes. They were pitch black. It was what allowed him to be recognized.

"Excuse me." Rui said to one of the support staff. "I need to deliver the target of the mission." he pointed to the boxes they had procured.

"Right here..." She managed to reply, before glancing at the corpse, unable to recognize the aura. "I'm afraid that trophies such as that are not allowed into the facility."

"It's not a trophy." He replied. "It's evidence. I would like to enter it into evidence."

"Evidence of...?"

"Of the fact that we killed a Martial Squire."

Rui ignored the commotion that his words sparked as they all quickly finished up their reports and statements and signatures.

"I'm done." Rui got up. "Catch you guys later."

Once Rui had completed the post-mission protocols, he moved on after bidding them goodbye.

He had a lot of thinking to do.

"What should I do now?" He wondered aloud.

It actually had only been ten or so days since he came out of training. Yet, it felt a lot longer.

He shook his head a bit. ('I don't want to jump into training immediately.')

He wasn't entirely done garnering experience with his current skillset. He also wasn't as smooth and comfortable using his skillset as perhaps he would like to be.

Solidifying his power with experience was just as important as learning new techniques. If he went on learning techniques without the minimal amount of experience supplementing them, his awareness and control of his power would slip. He would be ineffective and even unstable. Just like the Martial Squire that they fought was.

Besides he also had other things he wanted to do.

('I need to learn to read Vinfranesse.')

Rui mused. He absolutely intended to get to the bottom of the research data. He was even willing to go as far as to transcribe all of it into the Kandrian dialect so that Julian could help him understand the esoteric science unique to the world of Gaia. It would give him an idea of what was in store for him immediately after once he fulfilled the Squire candidacy condition.

It was also possible that Rui could optimize his breakthrough using the scientific foundation that he had inherited from Earth. If that were the case, he would be a fool not to look deeper into the research data procured from the facility.

It was especially valuable because the truth of the breakthrough to the Squire Realm was still something that was concealed from him by the Martial Union.

That more or less decided the path he would immediately take. Continuing his mission and understanding the research data that he had procured from the research facility would be the two

things he would immediately focus on. Once that was done, he would go into training with the knowledge of the Squire Realm.

"After that..." Rui muttered. "I'll probably leave the Martial Academy."

As time passed, the Martial Academy mattered less and less to him. Even if he left at this very moment, he would be able to manage just perfectly fine. The only reason he didn't immediately leave was that it was convenient and also, he would be faced with a large amount of debt that he would need to pay off.

Still, that debt was growing by the day, and he didn't want to prolong it for much longer, especially since it no longer offered him anything he wouldn't be able to get once he became a full-fledged Martial Artist. He would gain more freedom once his license upgraded to that of a full-fledged Martial license rather than the learner's license he currently had at the moment due to still being a student.

"I have much to do." He mused.

That day, a small rumor spread across circles. Certain circles in the town of Hajin, the Mantian Region, and even across the Kandrian Empire. Circles of the high upper-class elite, circles in the Kandrian Government, and even circles in the Martial Community.

The rumor was outrageous.

Five Martial Apprentices of the Academy defeated a Martial Squire.

Many of them had managed to get their hands on the names, recognizing the prominent heirs of the Martial Community, as well as the finalist of the Martial Contest.

Many scoffed at the notion. Yet even they choked when they heard the body had been retrieved.

It sparked more than ripples once the legitimacy of the news was verified. It sparked waves.

The legend of Rui Quarrier spread.

## Chapter 347: Understanding

Three weeks passed. Yet Rui hadn't undertaken another mission. In fact, not a single person had seen so much of a shadow of him after he locked himself in his dorm room with a box of books.

No one knew what he was up to.

Yet everyone was admittedly curious. The feat that he and the other performed in their previous mission had only spread more and more. It was practically impossible to hide such astounding news, especially since it had been heard by a large number of people in the Apprentice post-mission facility who technically were not bound by any rules to keep what they'd heard a secret.

And even if they were, the word would have leaked regardless.

Not a single person in the Academy or the other Academies was unsurprised. Rui had gone from being one of the strongest Martial Apprentices of his generation to performing a feat that was unthinkable for the Apprentice-Realm.

Of course, they did not possess the necessary context to understand that the feat was exaggerated and completely blown out of proportion and was far more grounded in reality than it sounded. However, not only did they not know, they did not care.

The remaining four Martial Apprentices had been harassed to no short extent. It had reached the point that Kane, Fae, and Hever had taken medium-term missions away from the Academy because they weren't being left alone.

Nel, on the other hand, simply attacked every single person that wouldn't leave him alone, resulting in him being penalized, since conflict outside the ring was not allowed.

Rui inadvertently avoided it by locking himself in his dorm room, he didn't know what was going on in the outside world, and he didn't care in the slightest.

THUD

He closed the book in his hand.

[Learning Vinfranese for the Advanced]

"Ok." He said. "I'm finally ready to begin."

In the past month, he had dedicated himself to learning Vinfranese. He had bought several learning books with the funds from his previous mission as well as a Vinfranese dictionary. He began obsessively learning the language soaking in the vast information and pouring it into his mind palace. It had taken him a while, but with his powerful mind and the Mind Palace technique, he had mastered the language in its entirety in under a month.

He closed his eyes, sitting in a meditative posture.

Yet he didn't see darkness, the mind palace he had built in his mind appeared. He immediately briskly walked over to a part of it where he had stored the research data of the research facility.

He opened the box, taking out the first log journal and opening it.

To his elation, the words were fully understandable. The document was structured quite similarly to how a research paper on Earth would be syntaxed. A section titled 'abstract' gave context and background followed by an introduction section that spoke more about the research project straightforwardly and then the body of the actual paper containing the actual data and research.

He immediately jumped in.

[45th autumn, year 406ME

Project Apotheosis

Abstract: The Commonwealth Duchy of Vinfrana is a nation with a weak Martial Foundation. Due to the mass migration of Martial Artists of higher Realms to other nations, the secret to the breakthrough to the Squire Realm that was monopolized by those of higher Realms was also lost. Since then, none of the Martial Apprentices of the Duchy have broken through. Among the few scarce pieces of information on the breakthrough to the Squire Realm that has been confirmed is the fact that the breakthrough to the Martial Squire is man-made and man-induced...]

Rui paused as his eyes knitted in deep thought at the last sentence. In truth, he had come to realize that by himself. He recalled the way the breakthrough to the Apprentice Realm was talked about when he was in the Explorer Stage.

It was talked about as a spontaneous epiphany that could occur at any moment. It was a natural process that the brain underwent that could not be triggered consciously by one's self or others.

Then he compared that to the way that the breakthrough to the Squire Realm was talked about. Every time it was spoken about, it was treated as something that was... controllable. That was something Rui had caught sharply. It was spoken off as a process or a procedure of sorts, rather than a singular spontaneous event.

The document said that it had been confirmed that the breakthrough was man-made. In research, this was not a term that was used lightly. It meant there was conclusive proof that all pointed to the fact that the breakthrough to the Squire Realm was not a natural event but was something engineered and developed by humans to a certain extent.

That was something Rui found exciting.

How exactly did this work?

It almost certainly required esoteric technology, Rui was certain of that. But how exactly did whatever fantastical technology used allow Martial Apprentices to step into a higher Realm of Martial Art?

He couldn't wait to find out.

He dived right back into the document.

[Among the few scarce pieces of information on the breakthrough to the Squire Realm that has been confirmed is the fact that the breakthrough to the Martial Squire is man-made and man-induced. The breakthrough is not something that will naturally occur without human intervention. This is the reason that none of the existing Martial Apprentices and Squire candidates have broken through to the Squire Realm since the mass migration of Martial Artists of the Commonwealth Duchy of Vinfrana. This is the fundamental reason the Duke has invested a tremendous amount of funds into the construction of the research facility and Project Apotheosis.

Another piece of information confirmed is that Martial Squires possess physical parameters that biologically far exceed conventional human parameters. Martial Apprentices possess brains with superhuman parameters while Martial Squires exceed the bounds of humanity in nearly every measurable attribute.

If such an outcome can unfold due to human intervention, then the first hypothesis that comes to mind is a form of human augmentation, or perhaps more aptly; human evolution.

That is the foundation for the research approach of Project Apotheosis...]

#### Chapter 348: Approach

"Interesting." Rui murmured. "It does make sense to turn to human augmentation or evolution if the superior physical parameters of Martial Squires were human engineered. Furthermore, it's clearly a procedure that only Martial Apprentices can go through, that should serve as a rather important clue when researching the breakthrough to the Squire Realm."

Rui resumed reading, moving on to the next section.

[Introduction: The goal of project Apotheosis is to discover or create a stable and consistent means of breaking through to the Squire Realm. As discussed in the previous section, the primary approach to fulfilling this goal is through a brute force attempt to naturally discover the process by engaging in research in all feasible means of human augmentation.

Although at first glance it seems to be far too large of scope to attempt, there are several constraints that reduce the number of possibilities from near-infinite to a much more manageable, albeit still extremely difficult, number.

The first condition is that it's a process that can successfully work only on Martial Apprentices, and only Squire Candidates, due to unknown reasons. It is clear that this means physical augmentation is not something that can be applied to humans or even most Martial Apprentices for that matter. That filters out several potential possibilities. The only physiological difference between Martial Apprentices and humans lies in the brain, thus we've decided to prioritize potential methods that aim to augment humans to those especially related to the brain in any way whatsoever.

The second condition is that it is unlikely to be a process that is highly financially taxing. We can be relatively certain of this. If the Squire breakthrough is purely the result of one or more extremely valuable and scarce esoteric resources or technologies, then we would not observe the sheer population of Martial Squires universally distributed across the Panama Continent and human civilization. It is clear that the difficulty of the breakthrough does not come from economic constraints.

The third condition is that the process is singular, it is not a collection of fundamentally different enhancement methods, but one enhancement method at the core that fundamentally enhances the body in its entirety. Thus, we can ignore methods that exclusively are completely limited to one portion of the body.]

"Interesting." Rui murmured. He did think this was the most reasonable path forward. He couldn't even begin to imagine how difficult stumbling onto the breakthrough of the Squire Realm was, but they certainly were being pragmatic about their approach to the matter.

He resumed reading.

[Down below are certain avenues of research that are under consideration;

Varnardium Blood Refining Spongification.

Infire Leech detoxification.



Cranial Greocardian Bleoplast Infection.

Drilliomint Intoxication.

...

Brunhild Spore Bone Marrow saturation.]

"Wow." Rui muttered. He didn't understand even a single one of the mentioned avenues of research. He felt as though he was back in high school and college.

It was effectively the same. The potential candidates of the breakthrough method to the Squire Realm were all based on the esoteric phenomena of the world of Gaia.

"I'm going to have to get Julian's help on this." Rui sighed. He didn't want to just skim on without, at the very least, gaining an understanding of the core of the methodologies involved. Otherwise, there would be no point in having memorized the information at hand.

"I should also purchase information on the methodologies involved." Rui noted. "That way even if Julian is unfamiliar with something in the research data, I can provide the information needed on the matter."

Rui got up, immediately leaving his dorm room. He headed over to the student affairs department and applied for a leave. He wished to head back home so he could talk to Julian immediately, now was the time he would have returned from the Kandrian Institute of Sciences.

To his surprise, the application was accepted on the spot.

"Aren't these things supposed to take time?" He asked, curious.

"Normally, they do." The staff member replied, smiling. "But your profile is marked with the permission to leave the Academy any time you want."

"I see..."

It seemed even the Academy did not see the need for Rui to remain in it, at this point. It had no problem with him leaving whenever he wanted. All of this supported the notion that his time at the Martial Academy was coming to an end.

Rui left the Academy as he headed straight home. At his current speed, it only took him twenty minutes to reach the Quarrier Orphanage.

"RRUUUIIIIII" Alice greeted him loudly with a smile when he arrived. "Surprise visit!"

"Hehehe." Rui smiled. "I had some free time and some stuff to do."

"Come in!"

The adults and children all greeted Rui.

"Big brother, teach us Martial Art!"

"Yeah! Teach us Martial Art!"

Rui's Martial Art had fascinated all the children in the Orphanage, but of them all, it had truly struck Max and Mana the most. They had dedicated themselves to the training regimes that Rui had told them to practice and it reflected.

Rui could see that their muscle tone had visibly grown since he last saw them nine months ago, which meant they were most certainly training very hard, just as hard as he did.

('I should put them through even more kick-boxing and Brazillian jiu-jitsu training like what I went through.') Rui mused. He had used the physical and combat training methodologies from Earth back when he had been training for the Martial Exam becoming remarkably proficient at them by the time, he

reached the age of thirteen. It certainly had helped him last in the Martial Exam and staved off the huge disadvantage he was at to a certain degree as far as the age gap went.

It certainly would give them an edge. At the very least Rui was sure they would eventually manage to get in before they cross the age limit for the Martial Exam.

"Welcome back Rui." Julian smiled. "What brings you back on this surprise visit?"

Rui turned to Julian. "I need your help with something, I think you'll find it interesting."

"Oh?" Julian raised an eyebrow. "I already am interested."

#### Chapter 349: Proposal

"Recently, I completed an international mission." Rui said, sipping tea after they had settled alone in a room. "I happened to get my hands on research data of great importance to my Martial Path."

Julian stared at him silently, waiting for him to finish.

"Research data on the breakthrough to the Squire Realm." Rui added. "It's legitimate and successful."

Julian's eyes widened. "Are you absolutely sure?"

"We fought a Martial Squire who broke through to the Squire Realm through the method developed by the research I obtained."

Julian almost spat out his tea as he burst into a bout of coughs, taking a few minutes to regain his composure. "Surely, you jest."

Rui shook his head. "You know I'm not."

"There's no way you fought a Martial Squire. You would be dead."

"She was only a quasi-Martial Squire as far combat prowess went." Rui clarified. "She had very recently broken through and was not only entirely unaccustomed to her power but also lacking in Squire-level techniques."

"But even then..." Julian continued.

"I didn't beat her alone. We were a team of five. One grade-ten Martial Apprentice." He pointed to himself. "And four grade-nine Martial Apprentices."

"Still..." Julian murmured uncertainly. "It's incredibly hard to believe."

"It definitely happened." Rui shook his head. "I'd show you the body, but I submitted it to the Martial Union as evidence."

Julian's eyes widened at those words. "That's... unbelievable. How strong have you become?"

"Quite." Rui admitted. "But that's beside the point. The point is, the research data is legitimate."

Julian regained his composure as he understood what Rui wanted from him. "You want help with understanding the research data from me, correct?"

Rui nodded. "I know you're busy, but I hope you'll help me out. Besides, you do stand to gain much if I'm not wrong."

Julian nodded. "The breakthrough to the Squire Realm is not easily revealed. I haven't been given access to that information despite becoming a full-fledged scholar of the Kandrian Institute of Sciences. I'm quite interested in what you have procured. But what I'm curious about is why are you so strongly interested in this?"

"What do you mean?"

"The Martial Union will give you the opportunity to attempt the breakthrough once you're ready." Julian told him. "Whatever information you managed to procure from outside the nation is certainly paltry compared to the highly-advanced and highly-refined breakthrough process and procedure the Martial Union has developed. At your absurdly high rate of growth, you'll almost certainly receive this opportunity. When that time comes, you'll gain access to not only the information you procured from your mission but also much more and more complete and reliable information that you surely couldn't get your hands on."

This was true. Julian had keenly noted this point as Rui had expected. But he could not explain the truth. The truth was that there was the possibility that his scientific foundation from Earth could potentially allow him to optimize his journey to the Squire Realm. It all depended on the mechanics of the breakthrough to the Squire Realm.

If this was the case, then he would rather find out sooner rather than later. He would like to know if there was something he could do during the next training stage that could either lessen the risk of the procedure or maximize his gains during the breakthrough.

"That's true." Rui admitted. "Still, I cannot share the Martial Union's information, they will surely have me sign a non-disclosure agreement of sorts regarding that. However, I can share this information with you and gain a more in-depth and thorough understanding of the breakthrough to the Squire Realm as well as how it was developed."

"I see..." Julian tentatively accepted that information. "Alright then, I'm more than willing to help you out with understanding the research data. When do we start?"

"As soon as I finish transcribing it myself." Rui replied.

"Yourself?" Julian frowned. "Just get it transcribed by a translator."

"No can do." Rui shook his head. "All of the data is in my mind. I memorized it perfectly from start to finish."

"What?" Julian's expression morphed into one of surprise. "But how?"

"An Apprentice-level mental technique." Rui replied nonchalantly.

"I see." Julian sighed. "I can't say I'm not envious."

"Hehe." Rui smirked playfully. "Anyways, I'll get back to you when I'm done."

"Alright." Julian nodded. "Message me when you're done."

"Will do."

Rui spent the rest of the day at the Orphanage. He always found it refreshing to return home and spend some time with his family. It usually took his mind off matters that otherwise perpetually consume his attention whether he liked it or not.

He'd spent some time training Max and Mana, giving them even more training regimes and routines and sparring methodologies while humoring them in some matches to satisfy their battle lust. There was only over a year left before they were old enough to undertake the Martial Exam. Rui wasn't entirely sure how he felt about that.

The Martial Exam was dangerous. There was a small risk of death and a few applicants died every year participating in it and many were left crippled, traumatized, and injured.

Still, he respected their determination. Once he left the Martial Academy, he would focus on training them a bit more before their first attempt.

Once the day ended, he returned to the Martial Academy.

"What's that you've got there?" Kane frowned when he saw Rui returning to the dorm with a bunch of boxes.

"A typewriter, ink, and paper supplies." Rui replied. "See you in however long whatever I'm about to do takes me."

He shut entered his room, shutting himself in before Kane could even ask what he was talking about.

Rui intended to finish the transcription process as soon as he could. The longer he delayed it, the longer he was delaying his own plans. He wanted to gain access to the information he wanted as soon as possible. Once he got it, it was time to take the next step toward Squire candidacy and eventually; the Squire Realm.

Chapter 350: Secret

"Are you sure the security is adequate?" A bald bearded man asked, glancing at the Martial Apprentice sitting opposite to him in the carriage.

"Do not worry, My lord." The Martial Apprentice replied. "Our Earthen Shieldforger party is one of the most reputed bodyguard parties in the Karjakin Confederation. We have a well-balanced team of Martial Artists, and most importantly, me, the most powerful defensive Martial Apprentice in the entire region as well as an excellent sensory Martial Apprentice here." He said, patting the Martial Apprentice sitting beside him.

"Hm." The man nodded. "That's good to hear."

"Still, I have to say. It's an honor to be assigned as the guard of a feudal lord like yourself, lord Faishon." The defensive Martial Apprentice smiled.

"Mm. It is an important and consequently risky occasion. I am enroute to declare war. There are those who oppose war. The pacifists will no doubt attempt to kill me, if they know about this journey. Fortunately, I have all of you. They should be unable to successfully take my life en route to the Haraul Region." He replied.

Feudal lord Faishon Durant was a feudal lord of the Karjakin Confederation, a tiny sovereign state some distance away from the Kandrian Empire. The Karjakin Confederation was a state rife with internal

conflict. Due to its nature as a confederate state, its political power was divided among many militaristic leaders known as feudal lords.

The state was always on the brink of civil war over the issue of monopoly and distribution of resources.

Recently, it was pushed over the brink when an irreconcilable disagreement caused one of the feudal leaders to decide to declare war.

Feudal lord Faishon Durant. He was currently en route to the Region ruled by another like-minded feudal lord.

However, he wasn't a fool. The pacifist faction formed by feudal lords with the goal of settling disagreements through peaceful means would do everything in their power to prevent him from sparking war.

Including ambushing and killing him.

He'd hired the most powerful and largest bodyguard party in his region.

A team of nine elite Martial Apprentices led by a vaunted defensive Martial Apprentice that the Martial Union had evaluated as the equivalent of grade-nine.

Nothing should have possibly gone wrong.

Should, being the keyword.

The sensory Martial Apprentice sitting beside the defensive Martial Apprentice froze. "Something is coming!"

The defensive Martial Apprentice immediately heightened his alertness as he turned to the sensory Martial Apprentice. "Which direction?"



The sensory Martial Apprentice closed his eyes before his opening them with a pale face, turning to the ceiling of the carriage. "UP!"

BOOM!

The carriage exploded the very next moment as a fearsome wind blast crushed it. The sensory Martial Apprentice was knocked out. The defensive Martial Apprentice was unharmed, yet he quickly turned back in alarm and panic.

His eyes widened when he saw the crushed corpse of feudal lord Faishon in front of him.

Rage pulsed through his body as he looked around, looking for the killer. "WHERE IS HE?!"

The entire guard force scanned their surroundings yet none of them had been able to find so much as a peep of the culprit.

A kilometer away;

BOOM!

"Mmm." Rui sighed as he walked out of the crater. "I still suck at aerial maneuvering."

He had used Tempestuous Ripple to elevate himself to a great height by firing downwards and using it as a propeller system, similar to a rocket, to reach directly above the carriage of the target of his mission and launched Tempestuous Ripples down once he reached close enough.

It was the most efficient and effective way to kill the feudal lord Faishon through the heavy-duty bodyguards the man had hired.

Unfortunately, his aerial maneuvering through Tempestuous Ripple was crude and embarrassing. He was still heads and shoulders below Ana Mariane, who had mastered aerial maneuvering through a

similar method to an extremely high degree. She could dance elegantly and smoothly in the air whereas Rui resembled a drunk caveman, in comparison.

"Well, at least it allowed me to complete the mission quickly." Rui shrugged, consoling himself. He pulled out the mission tracker device and hit the successful mission completion button, before setting off in the direction of the Kandrian Empire.

He was especially impatient to reach back home because of a message he had gotten from Julian.

[I've finished.]

Rui's eyes had twinkled at that message. It had been a little over a month since Rui handed over the completed transcripts of the research data he had procured from the research facility to Julian to read, understand and help Rui understand all the heavy esoteric science and technology that the research logs he had procured from the research facility used.

And now, Julian had finally finished and would help Rui completely understand the secret to the Squire Realm.

His eyes flashed with greed.

It had been far too long a time, but Rui had managed to patiently endure the entire time.

But now, he was ready.

He had originally planned to take his time with the assassination mission that the pacifist faction had commissioned, to be absolutely careful and execute the mission with surgical precision. But once he saw the message from Julian in the middle of the mission, he decided to go all-out and complete it as soon as possible.

He sprinted back to the Kandrian Empire with speeds that far exceeded that of even the fastest of cheetahs on Earth.

It took him only an hour to reach the Kandrian Empire. And merely another two hours to reach the town of Hajin.

He rushed to the Martial Academy before racing through all the post-mission protocols with a frenzied vigour.

It had taken him only five minutes to reach the Quarrier Orphanage once he sprinted back to the Quarrier Orphanage.

The sheer amount of energy he'd burnt in total was tremendous even for a Martial Apprentice of his caliber. He'd arrived a sweating wheezing mess when he walked into the Quarrier Orphanage.

"Julian!" He urged. "Tell me. What's the secret!?"