

## Martial Unity 351

### Chapter 351: Report

Julian sighed. "Calm down. Also, take off that mask."

Rui had completely forgotten to take off his mask all this time. It was a mask that disguised his hair and eyes. "Ah, my bad."

However, before he could pester Julian again, the rest of the Orphanage had noticed his arrival and fawned over him yet again. As he drowned in a crowd of adults and children, Julian took his time laughing heartily at Rui's plight.

"Finally!" Rui exclaimed as he sat down opposite to Julian. "Alright, no more delays. Spit it out!"

"Calm down." Julian told him. "I've prepared a short summary and a more elaborate and detailed summary depending on how much you want to know."

He told Rui before extracting two documents of varying sizes, and handing them to Rui.

Rui's eyes widened as he held the documents delicately, as though they were priceless artifacts made of glass. "This..."

"I have to say, it was truly an incredible read." Julian told Rui. "I learned far more than I ever imagined, and I'm still digesting all my gains. I have so many ideas that I would like to research derived from the research provided to me."

"I can imagine how beneficial it must have been," Rui told him. He knew the feeling, having been a researcher himself.

Julian nodded. "Even though their technology is much inferior to that of the Kandrian Empire, the knowledge and capabilities of the researchers involved surpass mine. The Commonwealth Duchy of Vinfrana truly went all out with Project Apotheosis, in all regards."

Rui nodded. "I can't wait to dig into it. Thanks a lot, Julian. Seriously, I can't express how grateful I am."

Julian smiled. "

Rui spent some more time at the Orphanage, having dinner before leaving for the Martial Academy.

Once he returned, he immediately locked himself in his room and began reading the quick brief report that Julian gave him. Once he finished that, he would move on to the more detailed report that explained the research

"Alright, let's see..." Rui murmured as he opened up the document.

[Introduction; The entirety of the research logs that you provided to me documented the inception of Project Apotheosis all the until the recent initial success of the project with subject SQ007. It documents nearly two years of reports and I'll be broadly summarizing the core of the research in a manner that is easy to understand for someone without a background in esoteric science.]

Rui nodded. This was indeed what he was looking for.

[The research begins with the inductive deduction that the breakthrough to the Squire Realm is something that is a) engineered manually b) Something that only Martial Apprentices viably undergo. Thus, the hypothesis emerges that the breakthrough to the Squire Realm is something with severe constraints that only some Martial Apprentices can endure.

A further deduction can be made that the constraint of the Squire breakthrough procedure is likely related to the brain. The reason this can be deduced is that the only physiological difference between Martial Apprentices and normal humans is in the brain. Thus, if there is a reason that the Squire breakthrough can be applied only to Martial Apprentices and not to ordinary humans would be because of the brain.

The final deduction made about the Squire Realm was that the breakthrough process was some form of human augmentation based on the fact that unlike Martial Apprentices, Martial Squires are augmented physically as well.

The fundamental research approach began by attempting to find the augmentation procedure via a brute force attempt.

For context, the avenue of human augmentation is not at all a new avenue of research by any means at all. The first recorded attempt at augmenting humans via the many fantastical esoteric resources in this world precedes the Age of Martial Art.

However, although many have tried, there hasn't yet been a successful attempt at mass production of augmented humans. The only successes have been extremely risky and fatal procedures with astronomically high mortality rates, or procedures with extremely high costs and needs. Many extremely large obstacles prevent the faint success of human augmentation from being even remotely mass-viable.

The research looked at a large variety of such existing means of human augmentation in hopes that Martial Apprentices could somehow overcome the large flaws and shortcomings that these methods had. Below are the methods that are primarily under the consideration of the research facility:

Varnardium Blood Refining Spongification: This is a method that purifies and energizes blood using a liquid esoteric known as Varnardium. The energized blood delivers its excess energy to all cells across the body, causing enhanced metabolic output. It's one of the earliest attempts at human augmentation. The following is an extremely oversimplified explanation, however, it should suffice for now. The procedure leads to a very temporary state of human augmentation; however, degeneration follows suit immediately after. The process causes the nervous system to degenerate until the connection between the brain and body no longer exists and the subject dies on the spot.

It's an inevitable outcome that the researchers hoped that Martial Apprentices would be able to overcome...]

"Interesting." Rui's eyes twinkled with interest.

He had already learned a lot even before delving into the report.

For starters, he had had no idea that the human augmentation field of research even existed. Let alone the fact that it existed for this long and was this widespread. He appreciated Julian providing him with

the necessary context that someone without a background in esoteric science did not possess. It helped him understand more about why certain decisions were made and how things came to be the way they were.

"Varnardium Blood refining spongification," Rui murmured. "Not an element that exists in the periodic table that's for sure."

The idea that a certain substance could 'purify' blood, whatever that meant on a bio-chemical level, and energize it to then distribute to all other cells across the body was truly fascinating. Rui even had a few ideas of what exactly was occurring thanks to his scientific background.

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"Probably something to do with ATP," Rui muttered.

ATP was the short form for Adenosine Triphosphate. It was the organic compound that provided energy for muscle movements, nerve impulse propagation, and several other important metabolic processes that required and consumed energy.

If a process was able to energize cells, then that likely meant it was somehow increasing the supply of ATP to the cells to increase the production of energy. As for how that was happening, Rui wasn't sure at all.

He turned back to the document, proceeding down to the list of means of human augmentation one by one. They each relied different mechanisms to try and augment the human body. They each had their own flaws and shortcomings.

And at the end of each method, Julian spoke about why each method eventually could not be the breakthrough to the Squire Realm.

He finally reached the final means of human augmentation;

[This brings us to the final potential candidate for the Squire breakthrough. I've gone into the other avenues of research and summed up why the head researcher dismissed all other avenues of research as the candidate for the Squire Realm. There's a reason I left this one for the last, I think you'll be quite fascinated by it, Rui.

The Flux Mutation procedure. To understand this process, I must provide some contextual scientific background.

Specifically, on how life evolves.

There is a theory on the natural development of life in this world; The Theory of Evolution.

The reason why species of animals, including humans, have evolved the way they have in this world is explained by this theory. The offspring of a generation of members of a species of creatures are never genetically identical to that of their parent generation. There are always small changes caused in the genetic information that defines all of the phenomena that occur within each organism from generation to generation due to inaccurate copying of information from the parent to the offspring and even external influences at times.

These changes are called mutations.

These mutations are not identical even across the members of the same generation. Different members of the same generation end up having different changes in their genetic information. However, not all of the mutations in the genetic information of an organism are good. Many a time these changes are bad, and reduce the probability of the organism surviving and thus, reproducing.

Those organisms with good mutations that increase the probability of survival and reproduction end up surviving and reproducing more than the organisms with bad mutations. Over time, this inevitably means that the next generation of the species ends up inheriting the good mutations rather than the bad mutations because the animals with the bad mutations died and reproduced much less.

The same process happens with the next generation, resulting in the generation after, having inherited better mutations. Over a long period of time, these inherited mutations snowball into a large difference. So much so that any given generation of a certain species greatly differs from its ancestral generations in the distant past.

And are much superior as well. This is how species evolve. This is how all species of life have evolved.

The Flux Mutation method aims to enhance the human body through a similar principle.

Although the human being is considered to be a single organism, what it really is, is a gigantic system of invisibly small organisms we call 'cells' that all work together in extraordinarily complex and numerous ways that beggar the imagination.

However, if it can, for the sake of the experiment, be considered as a group of organisms. Then the mechanism of the Theory of Evolution can be applied to the human being on a cellular level.

In theory, The Flux Method aimed to subject the body to harsh conditions via technological setups. These harsh conditions caused mass cell death across a particular region of the body. However, amidst the mass cell death, a small proportion of cells would survive. The body would then be fed high-grade healing potions so that the only remaining surviving cells of the body would quickly reproduce and new tissue formed with the new cells would be able to withstand the harsh conditions that they were initially subjected to.

The biggest drawback was that the probability of death was one hundred percent. This was expected. After all, killing off most of the cells was no different from killing off most of the body of the organism, which absolutely caused death. Even if there were few remaining living cells, the initial mass death immediately caused death, the healing potions thus could not heal the body.

The research facility tried a known method of reducing the intensity of the harsh conditions subjected to the human body. This way, a greater number of cells survived the filter. However, this had its own drawbacks. In order for there to be a high-enough probability of survival, one needed to ensure more than ninety-nine percent of cells survived.

However, this also inevitably meant that the quality of the augmentation, once the cell count was restored through replenishment via healing potions, was insignificant. There was no meaningful augmentation observable in even the slightest observable degree by any means whatsoever.

The research facility aimed to overcome this obstacle by subjecting the human body to an invisible form of energy we call 'radiation', This invisible form of energy is extremely similar to light, they're both of the same kind of energy.

This radiation when subjected to the cells of the body would affect the genetic information of the cells, causing mild changes at a much higher rate than normal. This would effectively speed up the rate at which the body evolved. Across several rounds of cell death and regeneration, the cells had undergone a significant amount of evolution.

Radiation, however, is dangerous. It could cause painful deaths and disastrous mutations if even the slightest amount was excess or if the subject was not healthy and a variety of other conditions. It took years for them to nearly perfect the process such that the radiation would merely increase the rate and degree of mutations occurring without causing nearly any other side-effect.

Nearly, being the key word...]

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[... The only, yet the biggest flaw of the augmentation method; Brain death. The brain was the by far the single most fragile organ of the body. What other organs could survive; even the heart and the lungs, it could not even come close to surviving. Even this near-perfect solution when subjected to subjects caused brain death. The combination of mass brain-cell death and radiation was simply too lethal.

If the brain was left unenhanced while the rest of the body was evolved via this method, then the brain would die of extreme seizures anyway due to being stressed with metabolic processes that it was not evolved to withstand. It was not possible to evolve the rest of the body but not the brain.

No solution worked; it was absolutely not a viable form of human augmentation. This is why it's a dead-end for ordinary humans.

Ordinary humans, being the keyword. The goal of Project Apotheosis was to discover the breakthrough process to the Squire Realm.

The research team did not give up on their final candidate. The final possibility was that even if human brains could not survive the process, it was possible that the superhumanly augmented brains of Martial Apprentices could.

This was put to the test with test subject SQ001. He was a hostile foreign Martial Apprentice caught infiltrating the Commonwealth Duchy of Vinfrana.

The result was a failure. However, this result was illuminating. The test subject's brain came far closer to the threshold of survival.

This gave the research team hope that the Flux Mutation method was the key to the Squire Realm. Each time they refined the process heavily before bringing in another test subject; SQ002.

Because of the extreme scarcity of Martial Apprentice test subjects, each experiment was conducted after a large amount of refining. Months went by between each test subject.

However, all of them were failures. Six Martial Apprentices died. But the research team was still optimistic. They reached closer and closer each time, fueled by the data of their failures.

Then, they succeeded.

Test subject SQ007; Caella Feeria; female. The equivalent of a grade-ten defensive Martial Artist. She was a volunteer test subject that was 'officially' sent as a guard but in actuality was a test subject. She was subjected to the latest and most refined Flux Mutation method.

She survived.

Her brain was powerful enough to withstand the procedure without dying or losing her consciousness due to brain death.

She had broken through to the Squire Realm; successfully becoming a Martial Squire.



This is the secret to the Squire Realm; Human evolution.

The features you described of her entire body matched that of the ones recorded in research logs. I do believe that you fought and defeated Squire test subject SQ007 in your mission.

And that is the end of the brief report on the research conducted in the research facility. The elaborate report contains all the nitty gritty details that I have entirely omitted or oversimplified in this report so that it remains easy for laymen without a background in esoteric science.

Hope that helped, feel free to come over and ask any questions you have.

~Julian.]

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Rui dropped the document as he stared off into space.

He was looking at walls, physically. But really, he was looking at nothing.

His mind was still in a state of shock as he struggled to even process what he had read.

"Evolution..." He murmured in wonder. "To think literal Darwinian Evolution would be the key to the Squire Realm."

He was beyond bewildered. Yet so many things made sense to him. It all fell into place. Like pieces of a puzzle. The many pieces he had picked up over a long period, one by one, falling into place.

"That's why only Squire candidates are allowed to attempt the breakthrough." Rui's eyes widened.  
"Normal Martial Apprentices would die."

Squire candidates needed to achieve a substantial degree of individuality. This was one of the two conditions of Squire candidacy.

Rui finally understood why.

('It's in order to ensure the brain can survive and withstand the process.') He realized. ('In order for the brain of the Martial Apprentice to survive, it has to be augmented enough. It has to be augmented far above human parameters. In order for it to be augmented enough, the Martial Apprentice has to walk deeper down one's Martial Path!')

Rui recalled something he had once been told by Headmaster Aronian.

"Your brain becomes more and more enhanced the more uniquely original and individualistic your Martial Art is. The greater the personal and original development your Martial Art goes, the deeper down your Martial Path you tread, and the greater your brain is enhanced as a consequence." Headmaster Aronian had told him, back then.

This meant the only way for a Martial Apprentice to have a powerful enough brain to survive the breakthrough was to tread deeper down one's Martial Path, which, in turn, requires one's Martial Art to have individuality.

"That's why it's the condition to be considered a candidate for the Squire Realm!" Rui exclaimed, growing more and more excited.

He had already fulfilled that condition.

Which meant that he could attempt and even survive the breakthrough to the Squire Realm!

What was the other condition for?

He didn't know. But, at the very least, as far as Martial matters went, the Martial Union was one hundred percent credible as an expert. He was sure that there was a valid and sound reason why Rui wasn't yet a Squire candidate despite being able to survive the breakthrough to the Squire Realm.

Rui had far too many questions besides from just that. Why couldn't this process be applied over and over again for infinite evolution? What were the 'harsh conditions' subjected to the human body for evolution to begin? How much radiation did they subject the body with? How did they regulate it?

He turned towards the more elaborate report that Julian had given him with gleaming eyes. He would surely find answers to those questions there.

#### Chapter 354: Further Insights

Once Julian provided context on all of the esoteric science that the research logs referenced, Rui had a far easier time understanding all of it. But he mostly focused on the Flux Evolution method, as it had been renamed by the end of the research logs.

"I see." Rui murmured as he read through the elaborate explanation report that Julian provided him. "The reason that the evolution procedure cannot just be performed infinitely is that there is a time limit before the radiation administered becomes lethal due to overdosage. On Earth, this would be considered to be an Acute Radiation Syndrome."

Julian's report mentioned prolonged exposure to radiation was lethal. What he was surprised by was the fact that they didn't know why. Both Julian and the researchers treated radiation as a dangerous but largely unknown and inscrutable form of energy similar to that of light.

"So, they haven't yet come up with Maxwell's Electromagnetic Theory or the Quantum Theory of light, huh?" Rui surmised. "They also haven't discovered DNA or a detailed structure and function of cells. It also doesn't seem like they have an accurately completed theory of the atom."

The research logs gave him a lot of insight into the scientific limitations of this world. While they possessed a large sum of knowledge on the many supernatural phenomena of this world, they did not develop deep scientific theories that explained the phenomena in this world.

Part of this was because esoteric sciences were largely sufficient and a proven field. Most of the research and development in this world was targeted around the esoteric and supernatural phenomena in this world. This neglected research into ordinary fields that looked at the more mundane and ordinary phenomena such as that of gravity.

Rui didn't necessarily fault them for this. In front of the many fantastical esoteric phenomena in this world capable of wonders, the ordinary phenomena weren't really as alluring in comparison.

('interesting.') Rui mused. ('The harsh conditions that they subjected the body to are varied depending on which biological system they are evolving. To evolve the muscular system, they subjected the muscular cells to a substance via a potion that would force the muscular cells to consume a greater amount of energy to produce greater amounts of muscular force. The muscular cells that couldn't keep up due to being too weak would perish while the genetically best cells would survive. The new cells reproduced from these surviving cells thanks to the healing potions will have mutated even more than normal thanks to the dosage of radiation that causes more mutations from generation to generation to speed up the evolution process. The process repeats over and over again such that each generation of mutated muscular cells is much superior to the previous generation. By the end of the procedure, the newest of muscle cells will have evolved far past normal human parameters.')

Rui was fascinated by this process. Similar processes had been developed for all biological systems in the body. These processes were such that only the genetically superior proportion of the cells of a particular biological system or organ would survive. The next generation of cells would inherit the superior genes with some amount of mutations caused by the radiation. The best mutations would survive in the next round while the worst would die. The end result was cells snowballed with the most superior genetic mutations over countless rounds of evolution.

This ended up with all biological systems and all types of cells being genetically far superior to the originals.

However, there were constraints. Not only was there a maximum amount of radiation the body could be subjected to before it became dangerous and lethal, but there were also internal constraints to the body. Increasing the metabolic power and capability of each cell increased the energy consumption of each cell. This was dangerous because if the energy consumption was too high then the stamina of the body would decrease.

Of course, the energy reserves also increased during the Squire breakthrough evolution process. The aim was to ensure that the balance suited the Martial Artist.

For some Martial Artists like Fae, increased power at the cost of stamina was desirable. It suited her style. She was a hyper-aggressive offensive fighter who went all-out to defeat her opponent with overwhelming offense in a short amount of time.

On the other hand, sacrificing stamina for greater raw muscular power was absolutely catastrophic for a Martial Artist like Milliana.

"Different Martial Artists need customized Squire breakthroughs." Rui realized. "You cannot universally apply the exact same identical procedure to different kinds of Martial Artists. It would ruin their Martial Path. Each Squire evolution needs to be surgically customized to fit the target Martial Artist."

"That is also why the Martial Squire we fought, Caella Freelia, was so unstable." He muttered. "Her body was not only completely different that it used to be. But the evolution 'configuration' she underwent was probably not customized for her. That's also why her control was so unstable. We would probably be dead if she underwent perfect evolution."

Rui wiped some sweat off his forehead. The fact that Caella had dominated them despite being nerfed in so many different ways went to show how much stronger true Martial Squires were.

"I bet this is the reason for the second condition of Squire candidacy." His eyes widened as he made another realization. "Assuming the Squire evolution is permanent, then getting the correct evolution configuration of physical parameters is absolutely vital. If your Martial Art changes drastically at its core after you undergo Squire evolution, you're fucked!"

In that case, it made sense to wait for a Martial Apprentice's Martial Art to mature so that it would not undergo any drastic fundamental changes. Otherwise, the irreversible Squire evolution would not be suited to the drastic changes.

Rui finally understood the reasons for Squire candidacy. The individuality condition was to ensure that the brain was augmented enough so that the Martial Apprentice's brain would survive the breakthrough. The maturity condition was to ensure that the Martial Art would not change drastically later on after the breakthrough to become incompatible with the Martial Artist's evolved body.

## Chapter 355: Considerations

Rui closed the report document. He burnt both of them since he had already committed them to memory, he didn't want this document to be leaked.

('Wow...') He sat back, pondering all the information he had digested. He had wondered about the breakthrough to the Squire Realm for years. And now, he had finally learned about it.

('The question now is... How do I use this to my advantage?') He wondered.

The whole goal of pursuing this knowledge was to somehow exploit it to give himself an advantage by relying on his background and other unique circumstances.

He had already begun to think hard about the matter.

('There are only three ways this can benefit me. I gain an advantage that no other Martial Artist normally has, or I mitigate an advantage no other Martial Artist is able to, or I bolster existing benefits to a degree that no other Martial Artist is able to.') He quickly surmised. ('Or some combination of the three as well, I suppose. I should jot down the avenues where there is potential for benefit.')

The existing benefits of the Squire evolution breakthrough were, of course, obvious and straightforward. Vastly improved genetics for superhuman metabolic parameters. Though Rui wasn't entirely sure how he could maximize his benefits.

Create better cell-straining processes that are used to filter out the genetically most superior cells?

Rui shook his head. All of the cell-straining processes that were used to filter out the genetically inferior cells were based on esoteric technology. Rui could not really use his scientific background to replace them. He would need to either develop conventional technology in his world or familiarize himself intimately with esoteric technology which could not be done in a short amount of time. There was no point in wasting time chasing down that path with no guaranteed returns.

('What about mitigating the drawbacks and constraints or giving myself benefits in other avenues?') He wondered.

This wasn't as unfeasible.

The drawbacks and constraints of the Squire evolution process were the radiation dosage limit and the stamina constraints. If he could somehow mitigate these two drawbacks, then his evolution should boost him to a significantly higher degree than what would normally be expected.

His eyes lit up as a few ideas entered his mind. "Hehehe... This is going to be interesting."

He spent the rest of the day in his room refining his plans for the Squire evolution breakthrough.

A few days passed.

It had been nearly a month since the mission in the Commonwealth Duchy of Vinfrana ended. At that time, the information regarding the shocking mission had been disseminated to a much larger extent. A large number of people with any ears in the general intelligence networks of the Empire had learned of the feat of the five Martial Apprentices.

Many wondered if this feat would set new standards for Martial Apprentices.

Everybody knew that each generation of Martial Apprentices was stronger than the previous generation of Martial Apprentices. This was because of the higher quantity and quality of techniques and trainings. This would inevitably cause the average level of Martial Apprentices to rise. Across a few generations, the difference would become noticeable.

When Martial Artists grew too powerful, the Martial Union would have to set new standards. The Martial Artist grades would be readjusted to account for the increase in power. The grades would all jump up one step. Grade-ten Martial Artists would become Grade-nine Martial Artists and so on and so forth.

Historically, this change would be made only when it became painfully evident that the Martial Artist grades were painfully outdated. This usually happened when an era-defining genius performed a feat so ridiculously impressive that it became extremely clear that the Martial Artist grades needed to be readjusted.

Many suspected that Rui and his feat of leading a victory against a Martial Squire would be the trigger or at the very least a significant contributor to that trigger.

This only made him that much more alluring as a Martial Artist to the many clientele of the Martial Union. Rui's inbox had been flooded with more than a hundred different personal commissions! He even received personal commissions from international clientele.

The commissions were as diverse as they were many. Ranging from more standard missions to odder and more unusual missions.

There was even a commission for a vial of his semen!

A commission that Rui had promptly refused on the spot.

Many in the Kandrian Empire had taken notice of him much more seriously than they did when he was merely the finalist in the Martial Contest.

The same could be said for the Martial Union. It was even more interested in him than anybody else. The Martial Sects dropped all pretenses and sent open invitations to him.

He got commissions from Martial Sects he didn't even know existed!

The Poison Sect, the Weapons Sect, and the Subterranean Sect.

Rui refused all the invitations, albeit with highly courteous and gratifying responses. He didn't want to piss off the Martial Sects.

He refused all but one.

The Symbiotic Sect.



He hadn't forgotten his interest in Symbiotic Martial Art techniques. Especially the fact that he likely had a high affinity with these techniques. He wanted to explore the possibility of him being able to benefit disproportionately due to a potential compatibility with these techniques. Problem was that he knew far too little about the techniques.

Although the Martial Academy did have symbiotic techniques, it wasn't nearly as extensive as he'd have hoped it would have been.

Thus, he had reached out to the individual who had invited him to Symbiotic Sect; Squire Grillo Logan.

If he expressed interest in symbiotic techniques, there was a pretty decent chance that Squire Grillo Logan would at the very least cooperate with him and help him out to increase the probability of Rui joining the Symbiotic Sect. It was practically a necessity if he had any hopes of Rui joining their Sect over any other larger Martial Sect in the Martial Union.

#### Chapter 356: Meeting

Rui entered the Martial Union Hajin branch after showing his learner's license and an invitation letter to the security.

The Martial Union was incredibly large, one could easily get lost in its vastness while navigating through its large structure. Thankfully, there were maps frequently placed across the entire complex. Otherwise, Rui would have gotten lost even with the Seismic Mapping technique.

CLACK

Rui opened the door to an office, having reached his destination. Inside was a Martial Squire in a business attire, which took Rui by surprise. He had done a remarkably good job at restraining his mental pressure, even if Rui's powerful senses and mind were able to detect it.

"Squire Grillo Logan, a pleasure to meet you." Rui greeted him respectfully.

"The pleasure is mine, Apprentice Quarrier." The Squire replied with a smile. "Have a seat."

Squire Grillo Logan was a rather old man and a clearly retired Martial Artist.

Rui took a seat at the table, as he scrutinized the room briefly. His eyes immediately fell on the name on the placard placed on the table as well as the photos of the Martial Squire and what appeared to be his family on the table.

"I must confess, I am surprised." Rui told him candidly. "I did not know that Martial Artists also occupied bureaucratic and management positions within the Martial Union. I was under the impression that these posts were occupied by non-Martial Artists."

"That is mostly true." Squire Grillo Logan confirmed. "More than ninety-five percent of the bureaucratic and management posts are actually occupied by normal humans. However, there are posts with a certain amount of autonomy and power that are a bit sensitive. For positions like these, the upper echelons wish these posts be occupied by retired Martial Artists like myself. Important posts with power and authority should be in the hands of Martial Artists because it is less likely that the power would be exploited against the class interests of Martial Artists and the Martial Union as a whole."

Rui nodded. That made sense. By ensuring that all the important positions were in the hands of Martial Artists, the loyalties of the people occupying these posts could be much more assured than if all these posts were occupied by normal humans. "I would imagine that all of the executive posts with no autonomous power are given to humans then."

"Indeed." Squire Grillo Logan nodded. "These posts are much lesser in significance in comparison to posts like my own. Of course, with the sheer number of such posts, they do possess a soft amount of power in total. Rest assured; the Martial Union has many fail-safes, deterrents, and contingencies."

He waved his hand. "Regardless, that's not particularly important or worth getting into. You have gone out of your way to set up a meeting with me. I presume you came here to make more than just light talk."

"Indeed." Rui nodded. "Let me be straightforward, I cannot accept the invitation of the Symbiotic Sect at this particular moment. I do not yet possess a single Symbiotic technique, after all. The reason I wished to speak to you was that I am interested in learning more about Symbiotic techniques. I do believe that I

might have a high degree of compatibility with them and thus want to work on at least one technique if that is the case. I was hoping you could help me out with this."

"I see..." The Squire responded thoughtfully. "I appreciate your honesty, as well as your interest in our Sect's techniques. I am more than willing to help you out, to a certain degree. However, you'll have to be a bit more specific with your interests. If all you want is a basic guide to help you understand the more esoteric nature of our techniques, then such a thing can easily be handled by the staff that I can have help you, it's not something that warrants me helping you out personally."

Rui nodded. "That would also be appreciated. However, I also do have a general idea of what I want from a symbiotic Martial Art technique."

"Go on." Squire Grigollan told him.

"I do not want the Symbiotic Martial Art technique to usurp or hinder the inherent and intrinsic human capability for the sake of additional capabilities. I do not want a symbiotic Martial Art that replaces human capability or potential in any way. What I seek from a symbiotic Martial Art is to enhance my strengths, or mitigate my shortcomings."

"I see..." The Squire murmured. "Unfortunately, that does cut away a large proportion of symbiotic Martial Art techniques. Most of the techniques of our Sect do replace human capability with the capabilities provided by symbiotes."

Rui nodded. He'd suspected as much when he saw how Fernan fought.

"Well, no matter." The Squire replied. "For what it's worth, I do think that the choice is indeed most fit for you. You're clearly an all-rounder. A technique that changes the configuration of your body unevenly like how most Symbiotic techniques do will likely not coincide with your Martial Art."

"Although this does reduce the number of techniques that can give you what you're looking for. It's not too much of a problem. For a single Martial Artist, we still have plenty of techniques that match what you're looking for. I'm sure that amidst all these techniques, there will be something that suits you." He finished.

"Thank you, Squire Grigollan." Rui bowed his head. "I appreciate your help."

"Not at all, young man." The Squire waved his hand. "I shall personally ensure a list of techniques that match the conditions you have laid out will be sent to you in the Martial Academy. The list will contain all the general information about the techniques that are normally displayed free of cost like in the technique scrolls of the Martial Academy. Once you find something you're interested in learning more about or purchasing some techniques, you can just purchase it from the Martial Union straightforwardly."

Rui smiled. "Thank you, much appreciated."

## Chapter 357: Techniques

Rui had begun making preparations for his next training stage and for the eventual breakthrough to the Squire Realm. Of course, he wasn't even a Squire candidate yet. He had hoped that the next training stage would lead to the maturity of his Martial Art as a whole.

Maturity was partially a nebulous concept, to begin with. Although Rui knew his Martial Art had not yet reached maturity, he had been told that when it did, he would feel instinctive certainty regarding the matter.

So far, he had felt no instinctive certainty of any kind yet.

Regardless, he could ensure that whenever the second condition would be fulfilled and the Squire evolution breakthrough would come around, he would be prepared.

"Alright now..." Rui murmured as he opened a document with the emblem of the Martial Union. "Let's see..."

The list of symbiotic techniques that abided by the conditions Rui had laid out had arrived. Once Rui made his decision regarding this matter one way or another, he would immediately delve into his next training stage.

The first page inside the document was an index page. The techniques were divided into intrinsic and extrinsic techniques as well as by offense, defense, maneuvering, or supplementary. Each section was further divided into sub-categories.

Rui whistled. This made things convenient.

He started skimming through the extrinsic section, pausing every time he came across a cool technique.

The techniques were grouped together under the core symbiote species with which the techniques could be performed.

[Silverstreak Winged Louse

Grade: 8

Difficulty grade: 7

The Silverstreak Winged louse is a parasite that can be found in rare portions of the mountain ranges in the north of the Kandrian Empire. This symbiote enters the bloodstream and makes its way to the cervical spine of a vertebrae creature. Once at the cervical spine, the creature burrows itself into the vertebrae of the host. After an initial period of gestation and gathering of the genetic information of the host, it begins the growth of wings outside of flesh. Within the span of two weeks, the pair of wings are fully grown and connected to the spinal cord and brain.

It placed a significant mental and nutritional burden on the body and mind.

Techniques associated with it include;

Tempestuous Whirlwind Sword: A wind projectile technique generated by the wings and a breathing technique performed by the user to manipulate the air density of the air around the wings to match that of the solids. The wings then generate a powerful flap that projects powerful wind blasts with great range and power.

Silverstreak Tautfirm Conditioning: A special kind of training designed for the Silverstreak Winged Louse. Increases tensile strength and rigidity of the flesh of the Silverstreak Winged Louse.

Aerial Flickering...]

A variety of techniques were listed under the Silverstreak Winged Louse.

('This is quite similar to Fernan's wings and techniques.') Rui noted, recalling the techniques he had seen when facing off against Fernan.

Fernan used techniques not too dissimilar to the techniques of the Silverstreak Winged Louse.

As for whether Rui was willing to insert the symbiote into his body, the answer was most certainly a resounding no.

Although wings were certainly useful. They ruined the balance of his Martial Art. Reducing his close-quarters combat flexibility and nimbleness in exchange for long-range aerial maneuvering. This would reduce his ability to adapt to Martial Artists whose prime weakness was close-quarters combat.

He had long disqualified symbiotes such as this one as potential candidates for the symbiote he was willing to insert into his body.

The other extrinsic techniques were all similar. Extra limbs, extra appendages, and all sorts of external growths would all ruin his balance and dampen his inherent potential.

He shook his head, dismissing all of them. He had more or less expected it, but indeed he would not be choosing even a single extrinsic technique.

('Hopefully, the intrinsic symbiotes and techniques will be better.') Rui sighed.

Once he opened them, however, he was surprised.

"Wow." His eyes lit up in interest.

Intrinsic symbiotes were certainly more along the lines of what he was looking for.

[Freshwater Skincreeper Symbiote

Grade: 7

Difficulty grade: 6

The Freshwater Skincreeper Symbiote is a symbiote that burrows itself into the outer flesh of its host and grows, spreading outwards, becoming a layer in the outer flesh of its host. It increases the resilience of the outer flesh of the host and increases the durability of the host as a whole. It is a static symbiote and does not have much of a scope for techniques beyond concentration and density adjustment and some amount of conditioning.]

"Not bad." Rui nodded. This symbiote increased his defense significantly. The best part was that its difficulty grade was below potency grade. Which meant he would get even more power from it than he would from a normal technique with the same amount of difficulty.

"But it's not what I'm looking for." Rui shook his head.

He wanted a symbiote that could do more than just provide him with mundane boosts. What he wanted was a symbiote that could provide him with special utility that normal techniques could not. Perhaps it could mitigate some of the drawbacks of his Martial Art or empower its strengths.

There was no point in going out of his way to get a symbiote that merely boosted his offense or defense. Those were things that even ordinary techniques could provide him. What he was looking for was a unique exotic solution that ordinary techniques couldn't provide him.

Ideally, it would be a symbiote that could enhance the viability or effectivity of the VOID algorithm. But he did not know whether such a symbiote existed.

He skimmed through the list with hopeful eyes, speeding past the offense, defense, and maneuvering pages, until he reached the supplementary section.

"This seems more promising." He murmured as he carefully went down each technique one by one.

That was when he came across something rather interesting to him.

"The Mindmirror Worm?" He frowned. "What the heck is that?"

Chapter 358: Weighing

[Mindmirror Worm

Grade: 10

Difficulty grade: 10

The Mindmirror Worm is an extremely rare worm that inhabits the Beast Domain. It infiltrates a potential host's system via ingestion or inhalation while it is still in the spore form before entering the bloodstream. It is one of the only symbiotes that aids the most vital organ in the human body: The brain...]

Rui's eyes widened at those words. The brain was an extraordinarily fragile organ, and Rui didn't understand how an invasive symbiote could not only not damage it but also somehow benefit it.

He continued reading on interest.

[The spore attaches itself to the bottom of the temporal lobe and the frontal lobe before it gathers the genetic information of the host through the blood and begins reproducing the brain cells known as 'neurons' in the gap between the brain and the skull plates below the brain. It saturates the gap, forming a small organ made up of neurons that are intimately connected to the host's brain.



It effectively forms a secondary brain that serves as an additional lobe for the brain. This secondary lobe is capable of boosting reactions and aids with mentally strenuous and time-consuming processes. It's an incredible boost that greatly enhances mental faculties.

Its downsides are that it increases nutritional expenditure and mentally burdens the brain to an extremely high degree, increasing the need for sleep, and causing the brain to need to sleep for an extra fifty percent without potions. It exceeds ordinary human parameters in so far as the mental stress it puts on the brain. The symbiote is also sentient and inherently power-hungry and does attempt to take over the brain of the host. Often succeeding in the cases of Martial Apprentices without powerful enough brains and minds.

All of these heavy drawbacks are the reason that the difficulty grade of the technique is grade ten. It is estimated that only someone with extraordinary mental parameters can possibly master the Mindmirror Symbiote.]

He was completely blown away by the symbiote. The drawbacks sounded incredibly scary, but the benefits were almost irresistible. Martial Apprentices were significantly above baseline human parameters because of their cerebral augmentations. This symbiote was effectively providing a boost that was not too far from the boost that Martial Apprentices gained thanks to the discovery of the Martial Path.

"No wonder the potency of the technique is grade ten." Rui sighed. "But the difficulty is equally high. Just the fact that there are high stakes at risk, for failure to master the technique alone means that it's game over. An easily grade-ten technique."

Normally, Rui ignored grade-ten techniques. They required extraordinary talent and extreme affinity for there to even be a reasonably-high possibility of mastery. Rui wasn't conventionally talented; one of his biggest advantages came over from inheriting an already-developed mind and the consequences of it undergoing a second round of cognitive growth.

However, he had come to realize that in the context of this technique, he might actually possess the 'talent' needed for it; extremely high mental parameters. He also had an affinity with it because the core of his Martial Art was a mentally intensive system of fighting; the VOID algorithm.

"Is this the reason this is literally at the very top of the list?" Rui wondered. He most certainly had not missed the glaring oddity it was to place a grade-ten technique at the very top of a list for someone who

had merely expressed interest in symbiotic techniques. That was a conscious decision made for a very clear reason.

"Is the Symbiotic Sect thinking what I'm thinking?" He wondered out loud.

It was far from a secret that Rui's mental parameters were far above baseline Martial Apprentices with the same amount of experience and time in the Apprentice Realm as him. The Martial Academy had carefully recorded and documented his feats and oddities.

If Squire Grilloan had the authority to look into the data the Martial Academy had on him, then Rui could see why this particular Symbiote had been put to his attention.

If it really took someone like Rui to succeed in mastering the Mindmirror Symbiote then there were probably no Martial Apprentices in the Kandrian Empire who had mastered the Mindmirror Symbiote.

Rui pondered the matter carefully. The benefits and demerits were extremely clear.

If he mastered the symbiote, the viability issue of the VOID algorithm would not only be completely and entirely gone, but his mastery of it would skyrocket. The sheer amount of information he would be able to process would be far greater than he currently was able to.

His current usage of the VOID algorithm was just barely satisfactory as far as proficiency went. The Mind Palace technique allowed him to store and process data at a far higher rate than would normally, especially with his mastery of it. But now, he could become incredibly masterful in his execution of the VOID algorithm. His overall combat prowess would skyrocket.

If he mastered this technique, he could very well become the strongest Martial Apprentice in the entirety of the Kandrian Empire.

The downsides were that his mind would be taxed more, understandably so. It would be receiving a constant influx of neuron impulses from the secondary lobe of the Mindmirror Symbiote and would need to process that.

"My rate of mastery of techniques would reduce," Rui murmured unhappily. The brain needed an increased amount of sleep due to the burden that the symbiote placed on it. Even if that wasn't the case for Rui due to his brain's superhumanly high mental capacity, he strongly suspected that he wouldn't be able to use potions to gain an extraordinary amount of training time.

His brain could either handle the symbiote, or the strain of no sleep for long periods.

But even his incredible brain and mind likely would not be able to handle both burdens at the same time. Which meant he would only be able to choose one of the two.

If he chose the symbiote, his training speed would no longer be extraordinary. If he wanted to retain his training speed, then he would not be able to obtain the symbiote.

#### Chapter 359: Options

He put aside the matter for now. He didn't need to make the decision immediately. It was not an easy choice and it was one he needed to make after careful consideration of the consequences. For now, he wanted to proceed with going through the rest of the intrinsic Martial Art techniques.

[Opticorb Symbiote

Grade: 9

Difficulty grade: 8

The Opticorb Symbiote is a symbiote that enters the body through the air as a larva before entering the bloodstream. Once in the body, it travels to one of the eyeballs and begins consuming it in a slow process, breaking down the cells and tissues into nutrients and building blocks for a new eyeball. The new eyeball, when completed, connects to the optical nerve and serves as the new eye for the host. The new eye has extreme physical parameters. It is able to cleanly perceive phenomena kilometers away as well as microscopic phenomena. Its field of vision is a perfect 360 degrees. It also provides the user with heat sense as well as numerous newer forms of perceptions that allow the user to gain an extremely thorough understanding of the environment.

Its downsides are that it produces a much higher mental burden not only due to the additional link to the brain but due to the far higher influx of sensory information from the symbiotic eye into the brain. The incapability of withstanding the burden will eventually lead to strokes and seizures.]

Rui's eyes widened in interest. This was certainly a remarkably alluring symbiote as a potential option to explore. Powerful sensory prowess would certainly benefit him on his missions, that was certainly true. Although Seismic Mapping and Primordial Instinct were just fine, having the symbiote would boost his environmental awareness by leaps and bounds.

His reconnaissance capabilities would skyrocket significantly. If he had had this ability in his missions, most of them would have succeeded with far greater ease and simplicity.

He kept a note of it as he skimmed through a few more.

[Grinwich Nervesprouter Louse

Grade: 9

Difficulty grade: 8

The Grinwich Nervesprouter Louse was a symbiote that consumed and replaced the entire nervous system of the host with a far superior nervous system with a much greater amount of speed and control than ordinary nervous systems of vertebrae creatures. Downsides include a standard amount of mental and physical strain.]

Rui nodded, considering it. It was certainly alluring but it didn't really provide him with something that would truly be of use to his Martial Path or his Martial Art.

He skimmed through all of them one by one. Although there were many alluring and compelling options, none of them truly uniquely benefitted his Martial Art with great compatibility.

He sighed.

By the time he reached the end of the list, none had struck him quite as the Mindmirror Symbiote did. Yet it was also one of the most treacherous options at hand.

Furthermore, it was yet another either or option in this scenario as well. He would not be able to take any other symbiote if he chose the Mindmirror Symbiote. He would not be able to choose the Mindmirror Symbiote if he chose any other Symbiote.

The reason for this was rather simple, the Mindmirror Symbiote would likely be far too mentally strenuous for his mind to possibly accommodate any other symbiote. This assumed his mind could even handle the Mindmirror Symbiote in the first place. If it couldn't, then there was no conversation to be had at all.

"I need to learn more about the Mindmirror Symbiote." Rui murmured. He was on the cusp of entering his next training stage. He did not want to be delayed too much longer, he already had ideas of what he wanted for the other techniques he would be mastering.

He immediately pulled out his communication device and sent a message to Squire Grillologan requesting more elaborate information on the technique.

He wasn't surprised that the information had arrived within the day.

He opened the document that had been sent to him by Squire Grillologan. The document was actually a compilation of research data on the effects of the Mindmirror Symbiote. The document detailed the exact consequences thoroughly, demonstrating the consequences of the Mindmirror Symbiote on ordinary test subjects.

It had even documented the failures of the Martial Apprentices who had chosen to try and tame the symbiote.

Rui had to admit, the data was intimidating. However, he was surprised to find out that there was one recorded success of mastery over the techniques.

A Martial Apprentice called Valem Deen had once successfully mastered the symbiote. Valem was a prodigious genius with an extraordinary mind. With an extremely high recorded IQ and several other

feats, his success had demonstrated that only a host with remarkable mental parameters and a high affinity could possibly master the technique.

Rui understood why the Symbiotic Sect had shown him the Mindmirror Symbiote. Rui's enhanced mind had gone far from unnoticed; they had not only noticed it but also found a powerful symbiote that only someone like himself would likely have a reasonable chance of mastering.

Of course, Rui was not foolish enough to believe that they were doing this out of philanthropy. He could see their motivations and intentions as clearly as day. By having a Martial Apprentice of his caliber master a grade-ten symbiote, it would likely increase the political capital the Symbiotic Sect had. Especially if Rui began dominating his peers if he mastered the symbiote. It would also be the most powerful technique in his Martial Art and, in their eyes, increased the probability of Rui joining the Symbiotic Sect.

If he failed, then at the very least the other Martial Sects would not gain a powerful Martial Apprentice who clearly had a bright future ahead of him.

Perhaps, this was a tad bit too pessimistic and paranoid, but Rui did not believe the truth was too different.

Still, as long as the information was legitimate, playing along may very well be his best choice.

## Chapter 360: Unorthodox

He wanted to get the perspective of someone reliable before he made a decision on the information. He would feel far more confident if someone reliable and trustworthy reaffirmed the information. There was a very high chance that the decision he made would, at the very least in part, shape the rest of his Martial Path. He could not afford to take any chances.

"And that's the reason I wanted to consult you, headmaster Aronian." Rui told him.

Rui had visited headmaster Aronian.

"Hmmm..." he stroked his beard as he held the document that Rui had shown him. "There's nothing wrong or misleading here."

"I see, thank you." Rui nodded.

"But still, the Symbiotic Sect. It seems that even the unorthodox Sects have gone out of their way to seek you after the staggering results you produced a month ago." The headmaster mused with a knowing tone.

Rui wasn't surprised he had found out. It was clear that the news was not something that could be hidden, given the number of people who seemed to have found out. He was more curious about the phrase that headmaster Aronian used.

"Unorthodox Sects?" Rui asked, curious. "What are those?"

"That's just a colloquial and informal phrase used to refer to Sects centered around Martial Art techniques that are unusual, strange, or esoteric in some manner." The headmaster explained. "Martial Sects like the Poison Sect, the Symbiotic Sect, and even the Weapon Sect fall under this broad category."

"Even the Weapon Sect is considered unorthodox?" Rui raised an eyebrow.

"Of course." Headmaster Aronian nodded. "How many Martial Artists wielding weapons do you see?"

"Very few." Rui admitted. He had seen a handful here and there and some in the Martial Festival nearly a year ago. "Why is that there are so few weapon-oriented Martial Artists?"

This was an oddity about the world that Rui had shrugged off but never dug too much deeper into. However, since then he had come to learn a lot more about the world and also much more about Martial Art from an anthropological perspective.

The oddity of the high scarcity of weapons was much more confusing than it was before.

"It's due to a combination of factors." Headmaster Aronian replied. "One of the biggest reasons is simply because there are far fewer Martial Artists whose Martial Path is weapon-centric. That's also partly why the Sect falls under the category of Unorthodox Sects. There are simply fewer Martial Artists whose Martial Path involves weapons."

"But why is that the case?" Rui asked. "Is it because of the overwhelmingly greater number of conventional unarmed techniques compared to armed techniques?"

"No, not quite." The headmaster shook his head. "The availability of techniques at the juncture of the Exploration Stage does not influence the Martial Path. The Martial Path is already set by that point, one needs to only discover it to become a Martial Apprentice. The reason there are so few weapon-centric Martial Artists is not because of the availability of techniques, but rather because weapon mastery is fundamentally and inherently deviant from the natural application of human prowess."

"Huh?" Rui tilted his head in confusion.

"Let me explain." The headmaster told him. "The frequency of occurrence of a certain type of Martial Art centered around a field depends on how much of inherent human capability the field primarily makes use of. Fields that make use of natural human capability primarily are more common Martial Paths than those that don't. Take, for example, a simple striking Martial Art. This Martial Path is strongly centered around natural human capability; the infliction of damage via the swinging of one's limbs. It's a very primal application of the human body in combat. Then look at Martial Paths centered around more esoteric fields like symbiotes, weapons, and poison. Do you see the difference?"

"I see..." Rui pondered aloud. "Because the convention unarmed Martial Art are closer to the natural application of the human body, they're more common consequently."

"That's right." Headmaster Aronian. "It isn't exactly clear why, but there is a clear difference in the frequencies of occurrence of certain fields as Martial Paths depend on how close they are to the most natural application of the human body. That's why offensive, defensive, and maneuvering are the most common Martial Paths. They're absolutely fundamental to the natural application of the human body. Poison is quite unnatural and artificial in that it requires the introduction of foreign substances into the human body to function. The same is even more true for symbiotic Martial Art. Weapon-centric Martial Art are also in the same predicament, albeit to a lesser degree. If the form of combat is too deviated"



"I see..." Rui nodded. This did indeed match up with his own observations of the Martial Paths he had come across. All-rounders, offensive, defensive, and maneuvering Martial Artists were certainly the most common types of Martial Art he had run into. "What about the other reasons?"

"There are economical and logistical constraints to weapon-oriented Martial Art that most other Martial Art generally do not suffer from." Headmaster Aronian replied. "For example, the weapons in question need to be able to bear the entirety of the power of the Martial Apprentice. You understand how tall an order that is, correct?"

Rui nodded in response. Martial Apprentices generated a tremendous amount of power. For weapons to be viable, they needed to be able to withstand that power for extended periods of time without breaking. For bladed weapons such as swords and knives, all of that power would be focused through an extraordinarily tiny segment of the sword. The material needed to be durable enough such that even a small portion of it needed to be able to withstand the power without breaking or deforming in even the slightest.

In other words, the material's tensile strength needed to exceed the Apprentice Realm significantly.

"There certainly are esoteric metals, compounds, and ores that can withstand the power of a Martial Apprentice. However, the supply cannot meet the demands to supply all or even most Martial Apprentices with weapons. At higher Martial Realms, the supply only grows scarcer and scarcer relative to the population of Martial Artists." Headmaster Aronian replied.