

Martial Unity 361

Chapter 361: The Next Step

"Perhaps it is more viable at the Apprentice Realm, but it becomes increasingly difficult for Martial Artists of higher Realms." Headmaster Aronian explained. "Martial Squires exert an enormous amount of force. Yet even they are akin to children before the might of Martial Seniors. The gap in power between the two Realms is as large as that of the gap between the Apprentice Realm. And above that Realm lies the Martial Master Realm. Martial Masters such as myself are capable of exerting titanic amounts of force far beyond anything you could even close to beginning to fathom."

He paused. "Of course, I am merely a retired old man who is far weaker than I was in my prime. Who knows? perhaps even you can defeat me, hohoho." He chuckled mirthfully.

Rui's eyebrow twitched at those words. Even though headmaster Aronian restricted the pressure his mind exerted, even the tiniest shreds of the weight of his mind were enough to strain Rui. There wasn't the faintest doubt in the latter's mind that headmaster Aronian could erase every trace of his existence with the slightest bit of exertion.

"But you get the point." Headmaster Aronian continued. "It's highly resource-intensive. Not only that but forging a weapon of enough quality to be worthy of a Martial Artist requires among the most skilled blacksmiths. However, the incredible toughness of the materials needed to forge the weapons is incredibly high. This means that the forging process is extremely difficult. Forging even a single weapon requires a massive amount of heat and powerful esoteric technology. The same is true for maintenance. It's an extremely expensive endeavor."

"I see..." Rui nodded. This made a lot of sense, it perfectly explained why weapon usage was common among humans, but not among Martial Artists. "Thank you for your explanations, Headmaster Aronian."

"Hoho, not at all." Headmaster Aronian. "Is there anything else you came to see me for?"

"No, this was all. Sorry for taking your time. I'll take my leave then." Rui said, bowing deeply.

"Mmm." He nodded. "You're at a crucial stage in your Martial Path. Soon, this Academy will no longer be able to be worthy of you, you will begin your life as an independent Martial Artist. You have important

decisions ahead of you. More than anything, make sure you stay true to your Martial Path at the end of the day."

"Yes headmaster," Rui affirmed. "Thank you."

He turned around and left the office.

The doors closed behind him as he headed towards the Apprentice library.

('Stay true to your Martial Path.') He repeated in his mind.

Which of the two choices was truer to his Martial Path? A path of speedy mastery of techniques, or a path that empowered the very core of his Martial Art that he had spent two lives working on?

In reality, the answer was always obvious. He was just extremely reluctant to part with the remarkable advantages that his training speed had due to his extreme tolerance for sleeplessness.

But anything pertaining to the VOID algorithm was more important to him. Especially a technique that could potentially allow him to use it with absolute perfection and excellence.

Its difficulty was certainly extremely high, but he demonstrably had the tools to overcome it. As long as he did everything he could, the probability that something would go wrong wasn't too high.

He brought out his communication device, sending a message to Squire Grilloan, informing him of his decision.

"This will be the last training stage where I retain my growth speed advantage." Rui murmured with a tinge of resignation. "I really have to make the most of it."

It was the same mindset one had when stocking up as much discounted food as possible before the prices went back to normal.

Just then, he reached the Apprentice Library, sighing.

('This will probably be the last time enter the Apprentice library of the Martial Academy.') He mused. He was pretty certain about this. Regardless of whether he became a Squire Candidate from this training stage or not, he would be leaving the Academy. It had begun to feel like a dull shackle that no longer provided him with much more utility. He yearned to be independent once more after getting rid of the debt he had incurred from his time at the Academy.

"Time for my final training stage at the Martial Academy." Rui murmured, walking in. The Apprentice library was now an extremely familiar place to him.

('Now then.') He wondered. ('What to pick?')

He hadn't entirely made his mind up. Though he was sure about the avenues of his Martial Art that he most certainly did not want to train.

('My physical parameters are quite solid from the last training stage.') He mused. ('I gain more from broadening my Martial Art allowing me to increase the number of Martial Art I can adapt to. That is my Martial Path, after all.')

Rui knew that there were still Martial Art out there that he was not fully capable of adapting to. He was more interested in targeting those than ones he was already fully capable of adapting to. That would mean he would need to diversify his capabilities to a certain extent.

To a certain extent, he was quite excited about this training stage, he would be gaining a large sum of new capabilities, or at the very least, that was what he would be aiming for.

('Now then.') He wondered. ('Where should I start?')

He glanced over to a particular section in the library.

The mental technique section. It was the same section where he had gotten the Mind Palace technique, which was the single most revolutionary technique that he had ever mastered in his entire life.

('If I'm going to start somewhere, why don't I go with techniques that I'm quite compatible with?') His eyes lit up in eagerness. The mental section had given him a gem last time, perhaps it would give him another this time as well.

('Doesn't hurt to look.') He shrugged.

Chapter 362: Mental

If he could diversify his Martial Art while also learning techniques he had an incredible amount of compatibility with. This would allow him to master higher-quality techniques with much less effort compared to normal techniques of the same amount of power.

Once he reached the mental section, he took a good long look at the techniques. He recalled running into many of the techniques he was seeing. In his previous training stage, he had given all of them a glance, however, dismissed them because he was looking for something very specific. Back then, he was looking for a mental technique that could help him use the pattern adaptation system of the VOID algorithm revolving around the predictive and adaptive evolution models.

Now, he had approached them with a significantly different mindset. He wanted something that give him additional capability rather than augmenting existing capabilities. It was the exact opposite mindset to the one had last time.

He began seeing techniques he didn't pay much attention to before.

His eyes fell on something interesting.

[Mind Mask]

('Interesting...') He thought to himself.

According to the description, the Mind Mask technique allowed the user to alter the danger that sentient life instinctively perceived from the user by an application of self-hypnosis. This could be used

to increase the amount of danger felt or also to decrease the amount of danger felt by the user. It could be used as a strategic deterrence via a bluff of being even stronger than one actually was to lower one's guard by appearing harmless despite being a Martial Apprentice.

At higher levels, it could be used to hinder an opponent by inducing an immense amount of fear and paranoia, causing one's opponent to perform sub-optimally. Mastering it to this degree was anywhere between a grade eight or nine as far as difficulty went.

The difficulty the user would experience with this technique was entirely dependent on the prowess of their visual imagination. It was not recommended to those Martial Apprentices with poor visual imagination, for the proficiency likely to be attained would be quite poor.

It was a strange technique where both the potency and difficulty grades of the technique were in flux and were entirely dependent on the mental prowess of the user.

Rui sighed.

The technique was almost calling out to him. How could he possibly toss out a technique of that kind with his circumstances?

"Alright fine." He picked up the scroll, putting it in his pouch.

He had to admit, he was eager to see how potent the technique would end up being in his hands. If his estimations weren't wrong, he would get to witness something truly amazing by the time he came around to mastering the technique.

He walked around, looking for something interesting and new. Mental techniques were so compatible with him that he was willing to train another one as long as it was worth it.

"Hm?" His eyes fell on something interesting.

[Mind Switch]

This was a grade-three training technique that would condition the mind and brain to trigger certain mental and neurological phenomena when the user took certain physical stances by creating associations between the targeted neurological phenomena.

This training technique could allow the user to enter into a calm and rational state of mind when the user performed the trigger stance that the desired calm and rational state of mind is strongly associated with the particular stance.

The user could program multiple trigger stances for multiple different states of mind. This would allow the user to operate under a desired state of mind at any point.

"This is association therapy." His eyes lit up with interest.

Association in the psychology of Earth referred to a mental connection between concepts, events, or mental states that usually stems from specific experiences. Association therapy was a form of treatment that applied this mental trait to treat and often even cure mental disorders.

"To think it could be elevated to an Apprentice-level technique that could be applied in combat." He murmured, before glancing back at the technique and shaking his head. It was a nice technique with practical utility but he had no real need of it as far as he was concerned. It was a very low-grade technique and something meant to help newbie Martial Apprentices retain their calmness and rationality instead of being hindered and shackled with fear. It wasn't really something that offered him something new. He had always managed to retain his wits even in despairing scenarios

Just as he walked away, he froze, before slowly turning back to the technique. "Wait... it can trigger any neurological phenomenon?"

He grabbed the technique reading the description again as his eyes lit up in interest. An incredible idea popped into his head.

"If I use this technique correctly... It could help me mitigate some of the constraints of the Squire Realm!" He realized.

Triggering neurological phenomena at will was something that could be abused and exploited to produce significant results.

('The Kandrian Empire does not know as much about human anatomy as I do.') He realized. ('That's why they didn't come up with the idea that I just did.')

He realized he had made a discovery of potentially incredible significance. If he was not wrong, this technique could make his journey to the Squire Realm a lot smoother and beneficial!

He glanced back at the technique. In its current state, it wasn't useful to him, therefore he didn't need to waste a slot of his final accelerated training stage on it. It would only be useful at a much later date.

He turned around walking away from the mental techniques section with a wide grin on his face.

He had one more reason to look forward to the day he became a Squire candidate.

But for now, he needed to get some techniques to master in the immediate training stage. He had already chosen the Mindmirror Symbiote as well as the Mind Mask technique. He had already reserved a spot for yet another mental technique in the future.

He intended to purchase some physical techniques for the remaining slots.

Chapter 363: Choices

"I should purchase techniques that will allow me to deal with things I currently can't deal with." He murmured. As far as missions went, he was incompetent at shadow-class missions and sub-par as far as hunter-class missions went.

He had long wanted to do something about that, but each time a training stage came around, there was always something or the other of greater importance. Finally, he was at a stage where he could pursue it straightforwardly.

"Alright, time to nail these two issues," Rui murmured as he walked over to the stealth section of the Apprentice Library. It wasn't his first time going for a stealth technique, he had purchased Blink, after all. The problem was that Blink was highly limited.

For starters, it was beginning to become obsolete at the higher echelons of the Apprentice Realm as Martial Apprentices tended to have naturally strong senses and many of them did have sensory techniques as well. He needed to use it extremely carefully else it could actually turn out to be detrimental to him.

Furthermore, as a stealth technique, it only worked to evade human evasion when there were few humans. It was impossible to use Blink to bypass even decent surveillance.

He didn't hold it against the technique, of course. The technique had served him well and had saved him in truly desperate situations, but it was no longer adequate.

"Alright then," He murmured. "Let's see what we have here."

There were plenty of techniques that boosted stealth, but what he was looking for was a high-grade technique that wholistically gave him stealth. He glanced over at a technique that caught his eye.

[Dead Step]

A technique that allowed the user to avoid the production of noise in the air by manipulating air via a coordinated breathing technique that cancels out the sound waves in the air.

He recalled seeing this technique a year and a half ago when he had purchased the Blink technique. However, back then he hadn't cared all that much about the technique.

Although it was more alluring now, he still shook his head.

('I need something more potent.') He noted.

His quality standards had risen with each training stage. He wasn't interested in learning lower-grade techniques unless there were specific reasons for it.

He skimmed through other techniques until he ran into something familiar.

[Void Step]

He sighed. Unlike with the Mindmirror Symbiote, he had almost zero talent or compatibility with the technique, so purchasing it would be a waste of money. It was a shame, of course. He deeply desired the prowess the technique gave the user.

He moved on, shaking his head.

Yet, it wasn't long before another technique lit his eyes up with interest.

[Shadow Step]

A downgraded version of the Void Step technique that used maneuvering-based misdirection to conceal and obscure one's presence to a partial degree. It could only completely evade the senses of ordinary humans the way Void Step did with Martial Apprentices. It was only partially effective against Martial Apprentices under several conditions. It was less effective the closer the surveilling Martial Apprentice target was to him, and only worked if he was in the far peripheral ends of the target's vision. Furthermore, the technique's effectiveness decreased the greater the sensory capabilities of the target were.

"Nice." Rui nodded. A technique that made all human surveillance ineffective and allowed him to bypass even Martial Artist surveillance with some amount of effort. This technique covered his basic needs perfectly well. His biggest issue wasn't that he didn't have extreme stealth capabilities that allowed him to bamboozle Martial Artists the way Kane could. His biggest problem was that he almost no viable stealth capabilities whatsoever.

The missions in the Commonwealth Duchy of Vinfrana and the Hefermaine Village would have gone far smoother and easier if he had had this technique back then.

Thankfully, it was a grade-seven technique. Which meant he could guarantee that he would master it as long as he put in enough effort.

Furthermore, although the potency of the technique was grade seven, Rui suspected his stealth would end up being greater than just what the technique would provide him. The Mind Mask technique could allow him to significantly lower his presence, which worked very synergically with the Shadow Step technique that misdirected attention away from his presence.

This was especially so since Rui suspected he likely had an extremely high compatibility with the Mind Mask technique.

He plucked the technique scroll out of the slot, inspecting it before nodding.

"Three down. Three more to go?"

He wanted to go with six techniques like last time since this would be the last time that he would be able to train a large number of techniques at once.

"What else?" He asked himself. He had solved his stealth problem.

"That leaves the hunter-class missions." He murmured. He hadn't forgotten about his desire to visit the Beast Domain. He had abstained from doing so because his compatibility with hunter-class missions was much lower than it was with missions involving humans.

However, with this training stage, his stealth would skyrocket, giving him the qualifications to travel the dangerous ecosystems of the Beast Domain. As long as he added solutions that were effective against Flora and Fauna, he would be qualified to enter the Beast Domain.

"I need to be able to hurt them for sure," Rui murmured.

As far as defense went, humans were often very different from Apprentice-level creatures. One of the biggest differences was size. Because they were usually larger, their vitals were tucked much deeper

within their body. Vertebrae mammals had a huge amount of flesh, fat, and fur on them that ordinary human attacks would simply not penetrate deep enough and would be dispersed.

He could punch them over and over, but the impact would be much more dispersed.

"I need a way to inflict damage on mammalian creatures despite that, otherwise taking them down will be a bloody pain in the ass." He murmured.

Chapter 364: Decisions

He had already computed several potential solutions from all the Martial Art techniques he had ever known off.

"Poison, piercing, heat, friction, and permeation are the prime candidates." He murmured.

Poison was attractive, it inflicted damage in a manner that completely bypassed the physical durability of the target. It didn't matter how tough one's muscles or bones were. Poison would inflict damage all the same. However, it was less effective the larger the target was. This was because a greater amount of mass meant a greater number of cells that the poison had to attack.

Piercing was a solid candidate as well, but he already had the Stinger. Although the Stinger had piercing depth limits that made it less lethal against larger targets, Rui wasn't sure it was worth getting another technique of the same kind. He was looking to expand the diversity of the fields his Martial Art covered, not build up more on a single field.

Heat was certainly a potent field. Ferlicia had gone incredibly far in the Martial Contest thanks to it. However, it had its problems. It was not a light field to delve into and would require an immense amount before it would become lethal to larger creatures. The size problem worked against it as well.

Friction was also a lethal field. Byron Harth had been chosen as the representative of his Martial Academy in the Martial Contest. However, it wasn't lethal enough to deal critical damage to mammalian creatures that had an incredibly thick amount of flesh and fur.

"That leaves permeation," Rui noted.

Permeation was a powerful field. Rui had personally fought against Servil Bisha who had given a long run for his money. Permeation was a field of striking techniques that allowed an impact to permeate deeper into the body of a target via vibrations. This allowed the power of a strike to bypass the strong flesh, bones, and muscles of the target to a large degree and inflict on the more vulnerable innards of the target.

It was quite perfectly suited for larger creatures. It allowed him to hurt them with every strike and even knock them out the same way he could knock out Martial Artists. It was perfect and especially suited to handling them. It lacked the same level of lethality as some of the other options but gave him more stability in his ability to hurt them.

It didn't even take him long to find a technique that suited his needs.

[Reverberating Lance]

A general formless technique that used high-level vibrations to permeate the impact of a strike deeper into the body to inflict damage more so onto the internal organs of the body rather than the tougher exteriors of the body.

It was a grade-seven technique, which was right at the sweet spot balance of potency and difficulty where Rui could absolutely guarantee that he could master it. Once he mastered that, his offensive prowess would probably approach the level of Fae.

He grinned, eager to master the technique.

"Four down. Two more to go." He noted. "Alright then. What else should I get?"

The past four techniques had strengthened his ability to adapt to a greater number of opponents and also handle shadow and hunter-class missions.

"Since I'm going to be embarking on the most difficult of missions, the danger will also be proportionally higher. I should get an endurance technique that will increase my survivability." He realized.

He hadn't purchased even a single endurance technique to date. Part of this was because he always had a healing potion at hand. However, not only were his missions getting increasingly dangerous, he was undertaking a lot of foreign missions. This meant that he was far and away from the safety nets that the Kandrian Empire and the Martial Union gave him.

Out there, there was often no support. This was especially true in places like the Beast Domain. Out there, he was truly on his own.

Getting a supplementary technique that could empower his endurance and survivability could be the key difference between life and death.

"Better safe than sorry." He concluded.

He skimmed through the supplementary techniques until he ran into something that met his needs.

[Final Breathing]

"What an ominous name." He raised an eyebrow.

It was a breathing technique that eased the pain by triggering an increased release of hormones that allowed for the pain to be less hindering than it normally was. It also accelerated the clotting of wounds, preventing the user from losing much blood. It was a breathing technique that minimized the shackles of damage as much as humanly possible and allowed the user to operate with the best they possibly could.

It was a grade-five technique, which meant it would be quite easy to master.

"This is pretty good." Rui nodded. He plucked the technique out of the slot and placed it in his pouch.

"One last technique." He mused. "What should I get?"

He had no idea. He strolled around the miscellaneous section aimlessly until he ran into a rather bizarre Martial Art technique. In all the time he had spent in the Academy, it certainly was one of the most unique techniques.

[Fauna Flow]

This was a technique that allowed Martial Apprentices to be able to communicate with the more intelligent creatures of the animal kingdom!

Rui raised his eyes in wonder.

Intelligent creatures often communicated via a form of non-verbal language since they certainly hadn't learned any human language. This allowed humans to be able to engage in the same kind of non-verbal language, effectively allowing humans to communicate with these creatures.

Rui found this technique fascinating. Yet at the same time, it wasn't as absurd as it initially came off. Research on Earth in the field of human behavioral science had shown that more than half of communication was inherently non-verbal. If that was the case, Rui could certainly see how that could inherently become the single form of communication between intelligent species who didn't have any other means of high-level communication with each other.

Chapter 365: Trainings

Rui was highly curious about what communication with intelligent creatures of other species was like.

But he was conflicted. It wasn't a combat-oriented technique, which meant it wouldn't make him stronger in combat or even increase his ability to complete missions. The only thing it would do was allow him to communicate with animals.

Yet, despite this, he really felt the urge to master the technique.

"Hmmm..." He had a complicated expression on his face.

After a bit, he finally decided to go on with it.

"Screw it. It's my Martial Art, I get to do with it what I want." He rationalized, trying to make himself feel better about his decision. "I bet there are some missions centered around the ability with the ability to communicate with the more intelligent life forms."

He grabbed the scroll for the technique before plopping it into his pouch.

With this, he had selected all six techniques for his next training stage;

Mindmirror Symbiote.

Mind Mask.

Shadow Step.

Reverberating Lance.

Final Breathing.

Fauna Flow.

These would be the six techniques that he had chosen to master. Each of the six techniques expanded his capabilities significantly, which had been the general goal of the upcoming training stage. The most immediate goal was to reach Squire candidacy, which could only be done once his Martial Art matured, fulfilling the second condition of Squire candidacy.

This was the reason he had gone on to expand his capabilities. He knew his Martial Art wouldn't reach a certain degree of maturity until he expanded its capabilities to a certain extent. Since it was meant to be an all-encompassing broad Martial Art in its ideal state.

He quickly headed over to the registrar of the library before purchasing all five of the scrolls. The sixth technique was something that he would be getting from the Martial Union directly. The Martial Academy was not equipped with the means to handle the Mindmirror Symbiote implantation. Even if it was, he would rather get the procedure managed by the Symbiotic Sect in the Martial Union who were the specialists surrounding the matter.

Once he purchased all five techniques, he took a seat at one of the tables before going through the training regime of each technique with great interest.

The Mind Mask technique had a training system that was quite interesting, yet it didn't deviate much from his expectations. It was training centered around meditation and thought processes that allowed the conscious mind to influence the subconscious mind to a certain degree. Initially, the process of self-hypnosis was quite long.

It would take hours for the user to first prime his own mind and set it in the right state via meditation. Once that occurred, the user needed to exercise imagination to create an image of themselves that diverged from reality as far as dangerousness and presence went. The technique worked by using well-defined imagination to substitute reality such that the subconscious mind responded to the imagination as though it were reality.

This raised the sense of danger that one could perceive from the user of the technique. The effectiveness and difficulty of the technique depended on the prowess of the imagination of the user and the amount of concentration the user could gather. It was a mentally demanding and taxing technique.

Perfect for Rui. The best part about the technique was that the technique had no upper limits inherently. Its only upper limits were the limits of the mind of the user of the technique.

It took a greater amount of imagination to construct an image the more the image deviated from reality. Since the user would have to rely more and more on imagination and less and less on the experience of what was real and actual.

Rui looked forward to the training of the technique.

He quickly opened up the other scrolls, going through them one by one.

"Interesting." He murmured.

The Shadow Step technique was certainly different and difficult. The technique definitely had a mental aspect to it as it required the understanding of how attention and awareness functioned, but beyond that, it was a rather brute-force technique with repetitive practice on the right forms and the right timing and placement of movements to engage in misdirection.

But at the core of the technique, the technique functioned by swiftly moving in the opposite direction that the attention of the user was being misdirected. The misdirection was integrated into the movements and had the same elements that people's movements had when their attention truly was on something in the opposite direction of their movements, like something chasing them.

The difference was when a Martial Apprentice with a superhuman brain and mind performed the same technique, it was much more effective because of the higher precision and accuracy of the maneuvers needed to draw attention away.

"It's not going to be easy to master this." He shook his head, before moving on to the other techniques.

The Reverberating Lance was an even more straightforward technique. The frequency at which a human being could vibrate their limbs was limited due to a neurological limit to the speed at which the human brain processed information and made decisions.

Because that limit was far higher for Martial Apprentices, the limit of the speed at which muscles could be vibrated was also much higher. However, that limit could not simply be attained, it could only be attained after immense practice.

The Reverberating Lance applied that to train the Martial Apprentice to vibrate their muscles at extremely high speeds and used that permeate an impact beyond just the outer skin, flesh, and muscles to the weaker and more vital organs within mammalian creatures.

Since it was a grade-seven technique, he wouldn't be pushed to the very absolute limit of vibration he could physiologically dish out, but he certainly would be pushed quite far along the way. Furthermore,

he would have to train it for every muscle group so that he could engage in the permeation of an impact regardless of how it was dished out.

Chapter 366: Regimes

The technique whose training he found quite interesting was that of the Fauna Flow technique. It required him to master non-verbal communication. It was like learning a new language, except it had universal rules that could be reverse-engineered and followed. What really helped about the language was that the Mind Palace technique could greatly aid in the learning of the technique.

Once Rui was done understanding the training procedures of each of the techniques, he immediately headed out to the training facilities for each technique.

"How many techniques is it this time?" Squire Dylon asked, before pausing. "No, wait, let me guess. Five? Six?"

"Six." Rui confirmed.

"Of course it's six." He snorted. "Well, what technique is it this time?"

"Reverberating Lance." Rui raised the scroll.

"Good pick." He admitted. "Good technique. Allows you to take down things far bigger and tougher than you. You've memorized the training regime, right?"

"Yep."

"Alright. Let's get started then."

The training regime designed by the Martial Academy for the training of the vibrational capabilities needed for the technique was quite fascinating. It relied on a body suit that covered every inch of the body except for the head.

The body suit was actually a piece of technology with the ability to vibrate any and all parts of the body suit in any direction, as controlled by a remote device. The Martial Artist needed to wear the body suit with the aim of negating and canceling the vibrations produced by the suit with the oscillations of one's own movements. Thus, if the suit vibrated the hand, the Martial Artist was to vibrate their arm in the opposite directions such that there were no net vibrations left because the two vibrations canceled each other.

The difficulty of the exercise rose when the frequency and speed of the vibrations also increased, requiring even greater vibrations from the user. Every time the user grew fully comfortable with a certain frequency and speed, the difficulty would be increased by one percent. Over the span of a few months, the net growth in the speed and frequency would grow well past human limitations.

Then the next phase of the training stage would teach the Martial Artist how to apply the vibration in the correct manner to permeate the impacts of strikes deeper into the body. It required accurate timing and placement of the vibrations, otherwise, the impact would simply not permeate well.

"Alright, the suit is adjusted." Squire Dylon remarked. "Let's get started with some basic arm vibrations at low setting."

Dylon fiddled with a device to get the suit vibrating. Rui quickly reacted before vibrating in the opposite direction, canceling out the vibrations and causing his arm to go still.

The difficulty increased progressively until Rui was no longer able to cancel them out.

"Alright, this is your limit, we'll stop here until you're able to cancel vibrations of this level."

A few hours quickly passed by.

"Damn." Rui muttered, rubbing his sore arm. "I couldn't get any higher."

"It's your first day." Squire Dylon replied, shrugging. "It's to be expected."

Once he was done with experiencing the training regime for the Reverberating Lance technique, he quickly moved to the training facilities for all the remaining techniques.

At the end of twenty hours, he was finally done with five of the techniques he had purchased.

"Maaan that was exhausting." He fell back into bed.

Part of it was because these techniques were all quite different from what he was normally accustomed to. Since he had gone out of his way to train with techniques that gave him brand-new capabilities that he didn't really possess before. Of course, some were easier while others were harder. Even though three of the five techniques were of the same difficulty grade, it didn't mean they were identical. The difficulty grades were a bit broad after all, furthermore, the compatibility of the techniques with the user mattered a lot.

Rui had a lot of fun with the Mind Mask technique. He had actually raced through the initial stage of the training at an incredible pace. Completing days worth of progress in the span of a single session. It didn't even feel like training. The way in which he was able to exercise his imagination to create the necessary images with the necessary amount of detail and consistency was something that had fascinated the Squire Instructor of the mental techniques training facility.

Still, it wasn't necessarily unexpected, Rui had shown incredible compatibility with mental techniques before when he mastered the Mind Palace technique to a basic mastery level in record time and then went on to elevate his mastery of the technique to a level that had simply never been reached before.

The Mind Mask training didn't even feel like training, it was just fun. He left the training stage regretful that he couldn't remain any longer.

He had other techniques to attend to, unfortunately.

"The Shadow Step was also smooth, much easier than I expected." He noted. The technique was mentally demanding after it was maneuvering-demanding. To an extent, Rui was also compatible with the technique.

The third easiest technique was Flow Fauna, which also required high cognitive capabilities to an extent. "It's just like learning another language." He remarked.

Final Breathing was the second hardest technique of the five after the Reverberating Lance technique. Even though its difficulty grade was lower, he had no special compatibility with the technique, which meant he had to slog it out the hard way.

"But the most difficult of them all is yet to come." Rui murmured.

He had yet to begin with the Mindmirror Symbiote implantation. It was a grade-ten Symbiote as far as difficulty went, and the only reason he had the courage to take on the Symbiote was that he had proof that he was qualified to at least attempt undertaking the Symbiote. If it wasn't for his high compatibility with it, trying to master the technique was pure suicide. Literally. And despite his compatibility, he would need to be extremely careful with the technique.

Chapter 367: Final technique

"Purpose of visit?" The guard at the main gate of the Martial Union asked, inspecting his learner's Martial license.

"Purchase of technique," Rui replied, before proceeding to fill in a bit of paperwork needed to enter the building.

Once he was in, he immediately headed for the symbiotic facility.

The Martial Union was even larger than the Martial Academy as it catered to not just far more missions, but also far more Martial Artists. Furthermore, the needs of Martial Artists were often greater than that of Martial Apprentices, thus a greater amount of space was inevitably required.

It took him a while until he reached the facility he was looking for.

"Ah, Apprentice Quarrier." A staff member nodded. "You do have an appointment scheduled for a symbiotic procedure. Please make your way to operating room fifty-one."

She handed him a receipt for the purchase of the Mindmirror Symbiote as well as its procedure. It was much more expensive than Rui had expected, but thankfully he had earned a hefty amount in the last month as well as the months prior. He was able to afford it.

"Apprentice Quarrier." A medical staff approached him after a bit of waiting in the designated room. "The procedure is ready. Please come this way, sir."

There were a few nurses and as well as a doctor, who welcomed him with a smile. "I am doctor Heela, I will be leading and overseeing the procedure. I believe you have been briefed on the procedure you will be undergoing today?"

"I have." Rui nodded. He had taken the liberty to completely familiarize himself with the process.

The implantation of the Mindmirror Symbiote was not a simple quick procedure, much to Rui's chagrin. Most Symbiotes normally took an extended period of time to fully grow and develop to maturity from the time of the implantation into the host. That process was normally highly accelerated with esoteric biotechnology such as potions made from esoteric substances and compounds that accelerated the growth of the symbiote as well as rejuvenating and nutritional potions that quickly supplied the symbiotes with a large amount of sustenance needed to sustain the accelerated growth of the symbiote.

However, that unfortunately could only be done to a highly limited degree with the Mindmirror Symbiote as an extremely accelerated process was too harsh on the brain of the host, and would likely cause brain damage. Furthermore, the development of the Mindmirror Symbiote was not simple inherently, and thus prolonging it more than normal to a certain degree was a cautious measure.

The symbiote larva would first be injected into the bloodstream at a particular point in the circulatory system and would enter the brain. This part was the first procedure that required thorough medical supervision and potential intervention during the bonding between the symbiote larva and the brain.

Once the symbiote successfully formed the initial bond with the brain, it would latch onto the occipitotemporal artery and vein to gain access to fresh blood in order to obtain the oxygen and other nutrients it needed to survive while also extracting the genetic information of the host. It would then undergo the growth phase, slowly expanding in volume, forming a small mass of interconnected human neurons underneath the brain and above the internal skull plates.

It would take a few days for the symbiotic brain mass to fully grow. The symbiote would need to slowly siphon energy nutrients and other compounds needed to reproduce more neurons.

When the secondary brain was developed was when the grade-ten difficulty of the technique would occur. The symbiote would begin the secondary bonding process between the secondary brain and the host's brain. Neurons of the secondary brain would branch out and latch onto open-ended neurons, forming connections with the host's brain.

And that was when the initial takeover process would begin while the bond was still in flux and not yet stabilized. It was akin to a virus; it was capable of corrupting the host's brain despite not being conscious or sentient. If the symbiote succeeded in taking over the brain, the host consciousness would be usurped. However, the host merely needed to resist until the secondary bond matured. Once that happened, the symbiote will have fully matured and its relationship with the host would be permanently unchangeable.

Only then would the implantation of the symbiote be considered a success. However, that was just the beginning as far as mastery of the symbiote went. The mental strain wouldn't begin immediately, it would begin once the secondary bond deepened and greater exchanges of information occurred that the brain was not supposed to deal with, putting an unnatural strain on it.

After that, it would take some time before the user obtained basic proficiency of the symbiote. The symbiote functioned like an extra-connected processor. It would not boost general cognitive phenomena and processes or massively boost his IQ, but it could process massive amounts of information in ways that he wanted to after a certain amount of training.

The secondary brain was like a high-speed processor hooked up to the brain. It was a blank slate that could be 'programmed' to process different kinds of information in different ways as per the user's wish via certain techniques. This allowed the user to pawn off time-consuming thought processes and calculations to the secondary brain which would process it much quicker than he would because it didn't have any other cognitive processes ongoing inside. It truly functioned more akin to a computer rather than a conscious organ.

Rui could program heightened reflexes, speedy calculations, and other neurological phenomena that his consciousness would be forced to do by itself. The secondary brain could process the information parallelly with his own consciousness once it had been trained to, allowing the speed at which he completed mental tasks to skyrocket significantly!

Rui wondered how much faster his processing of the VOID algorithm would grow. He was sure he would become so much superior with it that he would utterly crush anything he was currently capable of with it. He needed to contain his excitement; he didn't want to embarrass himself in front of the medical team that would be overseeing the procedure.

Chapter 368: Time

"Good, you've understood the procedure." The doctor nodded as Rui explained the procedure perfectly. "Have you made sure to satisfy the conditions for being viable for the procedure? Have you consumed alcohol in the past week?"

"No, I haven't." Rui confirmed.

"Have you consumed psychedelic drugs in the past forty days?" The doctor asked.

"Not at all."

"Did you get two nights of natural normal sleep without having consumed any mental rejuvenation potions?"

"I did." Rui assured.

The medical procedure required him to be awake till the procedure ended. Being asleep increased the probability that a complication would occur. The medical team would also be using rejuvenation potions before the secondary bonding occurred in order to ensure he was at his peak, mentally. However, an abuse of mental rejuvenation potions before the procedure began would reduce the effectiveness of the mental rejuvenation potions administered to him during the procedure, increasing the probability of failure of the procedure.

"Good. We'll be verifying this anyway with a few quick blood tests, of course." She smiled at him.

They quickly drew some blood with a special syringe that was able to pierce his conditioned skin. Thankfully, the results came within an hour.

"Good news, you're fit to undergo the procedure." Doctor Heela told him. "We'll begin shortly. We need to inject a few serums before you're ready for the implantation."

The medical team prepared all the devices and instruments. Soon he was injected with a few serums as promised.

"These serums are meant to ensure the initial bonding of the symbiote with the brain goes as smoothly as possible." Doctor Leela informed him as she injected the final one, explaining their purposes. A few minutes later, the procedure was finally ready to begin.

A strange-looking syringe was brought and provided to doctor Heela. A spot on his wrist was rubbed with an antibacterial as a strap was tightened to his forearm.

"We will begin the implantation of the Mindmirror symbiote." The doctor told him.

The thick needle of the syringe plunged past his conditioned skin painfully.

"Implantation complete. Heal the wound." Doctor Heela instructed as a nurse duly administered a healing potion to him, to stop the bleeding and close the wound.

They all immediately turned their attention to the projections on the screens behind him, carefully watching it without missing a beat.

"Symbiote has entered the bonding site." Doctor Leela remarked.

Rui had no idea how they knew that, but he suspected it was likely esoteric technology that allowed them to keep track of the symbiote via some physical trait that made its location apparent.

Some more time passed, as Rui simply lay unmoving patiently. He had already known it was going to be a long process and had long prepared himself psychologically.

"Bonding process has begun." Doctor Heela noted. "Prepare the RP-154 and HP-C16 potions."

She rattled off a few more instructions that Rui failed to comprehend. The nurses however swiftly prepared certain potions, ready to administer them to him the moment they were instructed to.

Rui on the other hand didn't feel a thing despite the fact that the Mindmirror Symbiote had already bonded with his brain according to doctor Heela's remarks. That was even scarier than if he had been able to notice it himself, he felt.

An hour passed before he got an update on it.

"Bonding process has succeeded." The doctor nodded. "The development phase has begun. Begin the potion administration."

They began administering Rui with potions periodically. The potions were physical rejuvenating potions and nutrient potions, but he didn't feel all that rejuvenated. The reason was, of course, known. All of the energy and nutrition supplied to his body was inevitably consumed by the Mindmirror Symbiote as it began growing in mass and volume.

"Let us know anything that you feel." Doctor Heela told him.

Rui simply nodded briefly. He found it rather amazing that he still wasn't able to feel anything quite yet. Yet there was a technical explanation for that as well, of course. The brain didn't have any sensory nerve endings as most organs did, thus it could not experience the sensation of touch or pain.

Furthermore, at this stage, the Mindmirror Symbiote still had a very shallow connection with his brain. It would take quite some time before the secondary brain of the Mindmirror Symbiote was fully developed.

Hours passed, and the nurses and the doctor kept a thorough track of the development stage of the Mindmirror Symbiote. The entire procedure was supposed to take a few days. The best thing Rui could do was simply stay awake.

Twelve hours later, the nurses rotated shifts with others, however, doctor Heela remained as the head of the medical team responsible for his case.

A few days later, the time had come.

"Development of the secondary brain is estimated at ninety-five percent." Doctor Heela remarked.
"Place the locks and shackles.

The nurses cuffed him to the bars of the bed. They meticulously cuffed each limb and joint at various places with thick rigid cuffs that prevented any escape. Even his head and neck were locked tightly in place. Rui had been informed about this detail ahead of time, so he didn't react to it. Once the secondary brain was developed, the brain takeover process from the Mindmirror Symbiote would begin. During that process, there was a chance of his body going out of control wildly, hurting the people around him and screwing the procedure.

"Ordinary steel won't be able to hold me." He told doctor Heela.

"I know." She smiled. "That's made up of peak Apprentice-level alloys. It is able to restrain you based on the data of your physical parameters. So do not worry."

Rui had mostly figured as much, he just wanted to make sure. A few hours passed by and the development of the secondary brain had finally been completed. Rui still couldn't feel a thing, but that would soon change.

"Administer the mental rejuvenation potion." The doctor instructed, before turning towards Rui.

"This is it. Stay strong and hold on until the bond stabilizes. Good luck." The doctor told him with a solemn tone.

Chapter 369: Clash

Rui wasn't sure what to expect, but what he went through was beyond his expectations.

The worst part about the Mindmirror Symbiote was that the information on the experience of having your mind invaded was scarce. The doctors could explain the process technically, but no one could tell him what he was going to experience inside his mind. No one could tell him that. Because no one alive had undergone the process and survived it.

The only information was records of the recounting of Apprentice Valem Deen, the only other confirmed and recorded Martial Apprentice to ever master the Mindmirror Symbiote in the Kandrian Empire. His recountings of the mental takeover phase were incoherent. He used vague flowery language to describe it and wasn't very informative.

He had described the process as a loss of everything, including himself as he fought a battle against the shadow of the symbiote until he finally woke up to realize he was still alive.

Rui wasn't sure what he meant but he tried to prepare himself by at the very least not being surprised and flustered regardless of what happened.

But he failed.

It happened out of nowhere.

His vision blackened and the world disappeared. His remaining senses were still functioning, but he had lost his vision. Thankfully, he could still perceive his environment perfectly with the help of his remaining senses.

But soon they dimmed quickly too.

Sense of hearing.

Sense of smell.

Touch.

He tried moving his body, but he couldn't even feel it. It was as though he had become a ghost floating in empty darkness.

Even more passive senses like his sense of balance and time were fading as well, bit by bit. Rui tried not to panic, his state of mind was relevant to whether or not the process would be a success, and he knew that. Yet before he could even fully regain his composure.

He felt something.

It was strange because all he could sense was darkness.

Yet, there was something in the darkness.

He could feel it.

Suddenly, a pair of eyes opened in front of him in the darkness.

They were inhuman. Mindless. But they stared, nonetheless.

('Is that... the symbiote?') Rui wondered with fear.

Before he could even ponder the matter, the darkness converged and gathered around the eyes, forming a pitch-black silhouette that resembled Rui.

Rui was finally able to see with the darkness around them having suddenly gathered into the silhouette. His eyes widened as he saw vision around him. What shocked him was that he recognized all of the visions around him.

They were visions of when he was first diagnosed with asthma, when he watched his first Bruce Lee movie, when he finished his degree when he began research on combat sports and of Project Water and the VOID algorithm, and when he died and was reborn in this world and when he discovered his Martial Path.

('These are my memories!') His eyes widened in shock.

Wait.

Eyes?

He glanced down in relief. His body had returned!

The shadow Rui, which had now fully formed, did not give him any time to process his situation. It lashed out against him moving and sprinting towards him as it launched a powerful blow.

The shock of the event hit him greater as he recognized the technique the shadow Rui used against him.

('Flowing Canon!') He gaped, grimacing in pain.

The very last thing he came into this procedure expecting was a physical fight. But that didn't mean he wasn't prepared for one. What shocked him, even more, was the fact that the shadow clone of himself was using his techniques.

He didn't understand the details of what was happening, but it was clear that he was experiencing a dream or a psychedelic illusion of sorts.

Still. He wasn't going to not fight back. If his state of mind was vital to the success of the procedure, then he had to go all out and fight back with everything he had. If he could do that, he would at the very least not be reducing the probability of the procedure being a success.

The worst part was that he had no idea how much time was left. Not only was the time period of the mental takeover phase undetermined and variable, but also, his sense of time was warped. He had no idea how much time had passed since he blacked out.

This was a psychological impediment, to some degree. If he knew exactly how long he needed to last then he would be able to mentally prepare himself for it and build up his resolve. But this was harder to do when he didn't know how long he needed to last. The sheer uncertainty regarding how long the ordeal would last could drive a man insane.

He felt a little pissed off at Apprentice Valem Deen, the only recorded Martial Apprentice of the Mindmirror Symbiote.

Couldn't he have been more clear and specific that there literally would be a very physical fight inside the mind? Rui swore he would have beaten the man black and blue if he was still alive. He intended to look into the man after the procedure regardless.

All these thoughts and considerations flashed across his mind instantly as the shadow clone of himself rushed at him with remarkable swiftness. Rui recognized the maneuvering techniques it used; Parallel Walk, Wind Breathing, and Balanced Direction.

Rui had no idea how the Symbiote got a hand of his techniques, but he didn't particularly have time to consider it.

The shadow clone rushed towards him launching yet another Flowing Canon.

WHOOSH

Rui dodged it this time, spiraling out of the way as he threw a flurry of strikes. The shadow Rui dodged all of the attacks with great agility and maneuvering before. It threw a swift kick at Rui, which Rui cleanly dodged. Yet;

BAM!

Another strike landed immediately after on him, having already reached the location he had dodged to!

Rui's eyes widened as he barely blocked the attack.

('It knew where I was going to move before I did!') He realized. ('Don't tell me it can use the VOID algorithm as well?!')

Chapter 370: Balance

Rui wasn't sure what was happening. He didn't understand how this was possible.

How was the symbiote, assuming that's what the shadow clone of himself was a manifestation of, able to gain access to his techniques? Not just his Martial Art techniques, but also the VOID algorithm. The movements that his shadow clone-self had displayed were without a doubt the VOID algorithm, the movement used was the perfect counter to his movement and it had been initiated even before his own.

That was the classic tell-tale sign of a perfectly executed VOID algorithm adaptation via the pattern adaptation system of the VOID algorithm. The shadow clone was clearly using it, as well as other techniques.

Rui had already computed two broad plausible hypotheses. The first hypothesis was that the visions he was experiencing were not actually from the Mindmirror Symbiote. He had just assumed that it shadow clone of himself was how his subconscious mind was processing the symbiote, but that's all that was; an assumption. It was entirely possible that the visions he was seeing now were no different from a dream or some other psychedelic illusion that his mind was generating as a result of trying to process the neurological and mental conflict with the Symbiote.

The explanation for the shadow clone of his being able to use his Flowing Void Style Martial Art was that the shadow clone was being generated by his subconscious mind which did, in fact, possess an intimate understanding of the Flowing Void Style. This would explain how the shadow clone was able to use the Flowing Void Style.

The second hypothesis was that the Mindmirror Symbiote had access to his memories and knowledge. And was able to extract information that would be useful against the host. It was possible that he was simply partly imagining the shadow clone using the Flowing Void style because those were the memories the Symbiote was accessing and triggering in some way.

There were other hypotheses, of course, but they all fell into the same category as the two hypotheses he had come up with. Either the Symbiote was genuinely accessing his memories and knowledge and Martial Art amidst the mental invasion, or he was simply imagining it due to an attempt of his mind to process the conflict in an understandable way.

However, there was one common trait that both hypotheses shared. Regardless of which hypothesis was true, it was a bad idea if he lost the fight.

If the fight really was merely his mind attempting to process the mental conflict, then losing the imaginary physical fight would mean he was losing the mental conflict since the former would merely be a visual representation of the latter according to the theory. If the imaginary physical fight was genuinely the core of the actual mental clash between his mind and the mental invasion of the Mindmirror Symbiote, then losing was absolutely a bad idea.

('I have to win no matter what, then.')

Rui reaffirmed.

He turtled up, defending as he gathered his concentration and focus.

Perhaps it was the peril of the situation he was in.

Perhaps it was because of what was at stake.

Perhaps it was because he was fighting a clone of himself.

Perhaps it was because he was inside his own mind.

Regardless of what it was, he was able to enter a highly focused state almost instantaneously. The shadow clone paused as Rui stared at it with his pitch-black pupils.

WHOOSH

Rui dashed off towards his dark clone, throwing speedy jabs.

WHOOSH

The clone swerved out of the way, but in vain;

BOOM!

A colossal attack crashed into his clone as it was launched away.

Rui grinned. ('It worked!')

If the shadow clone fought identically to him, then wasn't there a good chance that it used the same movement patterns as he did?

If that was indeed the case then he very well could just create a predictive model on himself and apply it to the clone, couldn't he?

Rui and his clone rushed at each other with immense speed. What followed was a marvel that would likely never reoccur.

Two identical Martial Artists.

Two VOID algorithms.

They clashed against each other in a furious exchange of attacks. They were both using the VOID algorithm, they were both using the same predictive model and the same adaptive evolution model. They were equal in nearly every way.

Except for longevity.

The worst part about losing his sense of time was that it became harder to compute stamina. He had energy constraints, yet it seemed as though the shadow clone didn't have any restriction on that front.

Time passed, more than he knew. He grew increasingly mentally fatigued. The psychological stress of not knowing how and when this nightmare was going to end was also starting to gnaw at him, he was generally quite composed, but under such circumstances even he was starting to feel the strain. It took an immense amount of mental fortitude to maintain his calm and not panic. And it was only growing harder and harder as an immeasurable amount of time passed.

Physical stamina wasn't a thing, but mental stamina was indeed a thing, at the end of the day.

POW!

Rui grimaced as a strike landed square on his jaw. He had fallen behind on his reactions by just a beat and the shadow clone, which had not yet ceased to be pitcher perfect, overwhelmed him in that regard. The strike had created an opening that the shadow clone brutally exploited with an avalanche of attacks, just as he would have if he were in its place. It was the best option.

That was bad news for him. He went all-out with defense and evasion as he tried to regain his bearings and restore the balance of initiative.

WHOOSH

He avoided a strike, leaping backward. Yet;

BAM!

The clone followed through immediately, predicting his retreat and landing a Tempestuous Ripple on Rui.

('Damn it!') He cursed. ('At this rate, the disadvantages will simply snowball!')