

Martial Unity 1371

Chapter 1371: Offer

"The perfect assassination." The professor murmured. "Incredible. This is game-changing."

Rui smirked. He was quite proud of the technique that he had come up with. This technique project had reminded him of the satisfaction of developing powerful techniques from scratch and developing his Martial Art.

It had been therapeutic and refreshing to develop his new technique from scratch. He didn't even care if it was something as dark as assassination techniques, a success was a success.

"So, next target," Rui remarked.

"Wait, we have something to discuss." The professor remarked. "My superior wishes to speak to you."

Rui raised an eyebrow. "About what?"

"About your recent assassination, of course," The professor snorted. "He has invited you to a meeting."

Rui considered it for a moment, before shrugging. "Sure."

The professor nodded, before nodding at a library staff member stationed in the room. "She will guide you to the meeting."

Rui left the room following the woman down the many corridors deep into the Libraries of Gehu, before eventually reaching an enormous lecture hall of sorts. Rui wondered what was even the point of having such a thing at a library.

Perhaps they invited genuine guest writers from time to time and had them give speeches on their literary works.

Regardless, there was a man who sat down alone in the front row of the lecture hall, reading a book. The staff member shut the door behind them as he felt his senses being strongly hampered.

Rui glanced at the man, taking note of his physical appearance. He had an incredibly aged appearance, one that conveyed the wealth of his experience.

"You're here." The man remarked. "Good, come have a seat."

"I heard you wanted to speak with me."

"Of course." The man remarked. "Why wouldn't I?"

Rui walked down the declining stairs as he propped himself over beside the man silently.

He wasn't the one that sought to talk.

"You know this book, right here?" The man closed it, showing Rui the cover.

[The Birth of Darkness]

It had an unsettling cover, one that couldn't have possibly been meant to draw in readers.

"It's a meta-analysis on the impacts that the discovery of misdirection Martial Art techniques had on the world in the year ninety-seven." The man remarked. "It had many impacts, but it first and foremost gave rise to a whole new branch of assassination techniques. It gave rise to a whole new breed of assassins. The first assassin who mastered these techniques was Transcendent Frin, and he changed the world."

The man's eyes narrowed. "Because he wielded the most powerful techniques of his era. He became the greatest Martial Art assassin of not just his era, but all eras to come after. It all started with him being the first one to truly grasp this field."

Rui silently listened.

It was an intriguing story, but he wasn't sure why he was called here.

"I was rereading this book because I was recently reminded of it." The man remarked. "Another assassin who came to grab hold of a field that may very well have the same impact on this world."

He glanced at Rui, making eye contact for the first time.

"You flatter me but... I'm not an assassin." Rui shook his head. "I just have someone I need to kill."

"I'm aware," The man remarked with an amused expression. "And in the process developed an unprecedented technique based on unseen principles and mechanics."

Rui shrugged. "I don't do things half-heartedly."

"Yes, we have come to increasingly learn that in our correspondence with you." The man broke a smile. "If you don't do things half-heartedly, then perhaps you would like to consider a decision that requires full-hearted commitment."

Rui simply stared at him, waiting for him to get to the point.

"Join us, Senior Falken." The man remarked. "We could use a man like you."

Rui narrowed his eyes. "That wasn't what I was expecting."

The man shrugged. "Life has a tendency to be unexpected."

"I'm assuming that if I do accept membership, it will be the permanent kind."

"Correct." The man remarked. "You will not be able to operate as a free agent anymore. You will serve the sect."

"You're not making your case look more alluring."

"I'm simply stating the truth," The man looked amused. "I don't want to insult your demonstrated intelligence by trying to pull off little psychological tricks to try and compel you in vain."

"Yes, but you could at least try making a deal that looks attractive." Rui snorted.

"We'll kill Chairman Deacon the moment you accept." The man remarked.

Rui narrowed his eyes. "It's that easy, huh?"

"Well, killing him the moment you accept is a bit much, admittedly." The man smirked. "Though we can arrange that as well if you want."

"In exchange for lifelong service to the Beggar's Sect," Rui remarked. "Was my assassination that alluring?"

"More than you realize." The man replied. "I am the regional manager of the Derschek branch of our foreign affairs department. I took the liberty to meet with you personally as a token of my value for you and your capabilities."

Rui considered it for a moment, before shaking his head. "I'm fine. I'll kill him myself. Worst-case scenario, I'll exchange this service for commission payment. Work for Beggar's Sect for a time to have Chairman Deacon. But I will not be subservient to any force."

This was no different from the deal that the Martial Union had offered him, in effect. If Rui pledged his undying loyalty to the Martial Union, they would undoubtedly get rid of the variable that threatened to eliminate their newfound operator.

Both the Beggar's Sect and the Martial Union were powerful enough to get rid of even someone like Chairman Deacon. Both of them demanded a price that Rui was unwilling to fulfill.

"Is that so?" The man remarked nonchalantly. "Shame. Let Carl know if you ever change your mind, we'd welcome a man of your talents, a man of your talent."

Chapter 1372: Sus

Rui exited the lecture hall as the staff member waiting outside immediately guided him back to the professor's office. He was deep in thought. He found it a shame that people who had the power to kill Chairman Deacon and even made the offer to take him out only were willing to do so at the price of Rui's servitude.

It was just too much.

Besides, he would rather kill Chairman Deacon himself. It was something he needed to do himself.

He immediately returned to the professor's office, closing the door behind him.

"Shame to know you won't be joining us." The man remarked. "We could do a lot with someone like you amongst our ranks."

Rui shrugged. "You'll have to make do without me. besides, I'm sure there are other brilliant Martial Seniors out there. High-grade and peak Martial Seniors. Surely they can replicate what I did through their own innate capabilities."

"Do you have any idea how few Martial Seniors there are that managed to reach the highest echelons of the Senior Realm?" The professor snorted. "Besides, being the youngest Martial Senior in existence and already being this potent and effective means that you will be a monster when you have time to mature and grow. Are you sure you don't want to join our sect? You'd get quite the privileged position within our ranks you know."

Rui shook his head. "It was not even a remote possibility."

"Shame." The man remarked.

"Let's get back to the matter at hand," Rui said. "I may not be joining the sect, but I will help you clean up the Derschek Region."

Rui went over the list of Martial Senior targets one by one before making his next choice.

"Her." Rui pointed to his choice.

[Sele Friun]

Another person who was relatively young for a Martial Senior. He needed to start out slow and steady to make sure that he didn't overstep.

Because the Senior Realm had fifteen grades, it meant that the difference between himself and the high-grade and peak Martial Seniors could be substantial. Although there were no truly notable Martial Seniors in that range in the Shadow Isles, he still did not want to underestimate them given that even reaching the mid-grade of the Senior Realm would still be impressive considering the size of the Senior Realm.

It was possible that Martial Seniors of higher grades would not be such easy targets to kill, he did not want to find out the hard way if that was true.

"Senior Sele it is." The professor nodded. "I'll have a more in-depth report on her prepared for you."

"That will be much appreciated." Rui nodded.

It wasn't long before Rui got deeper access to the data that the Beggar's Sect had prepared on her.

"Interesting..." Rui murmured. "A grappling-oriented assassin is something I didn't expect, I have to confess."

"There are all kinds of assassination philosophies." The man remarked. "I've seen even more bizarre ones, trust me."

"Her lack of range makes her a good target." Rui mused. "The consequences of failure will be minimized. I should get started."

"Be careful, she's a founding member of Area Crina, they will not take her death lightly."

Rui's eyes narrowed at the mention of that name. "I don't trust Area Crina. That name... You know what it's an anagram for, right?"

"Of course, we do," The professor snorted. "Do you have any idea how much manpower and a variety of other resources have gone into investigating it? We spent seven years conducting the most thorough investigation on Area Crina, the Crina Foundation, and its founder Skia Crina. After a particularly lengthy investigation, we have concluded that it is a coincidence."

Rui furrowed his eyebrows with skepticism.

"We found nothing particularly suspicious about them. Lady Crina was born well before the Silent Shadow retired and gained her wealth before that happened. We even know why Lady Crina seeks the Silent Shadow. It truly is an unfortunate coincidence that happens to be overlooked by most people."

The Beggar's Sect's operations were extremely solid, so the fact that they didn't find anything off was a pretty solid vote of coincidence.

However, it wasn't absolute.

He wasn't able to bring himself to trust the Silent Shadow.

He shook his head. Regardless, he was confident in his plan to use assassination to find her. It made a lot of logical sense and was a plan that he cooked up after looking at all the available information and facts at hand.

Regardless of whether the anagram was a coincidence or not, he had only one task.

Kill.

He was to kill all of them.

At least, all of the Martial Seniors. He didn't want to piss off the Panamic Martial Federation, thankfully, he didn't need to kill them to find the Silent Shadow or destroy the assassination industry in the Derschek Region.

Both of these things were things that could be done without such extreme measures.

He immediately got to work, tailing Senior Sele around in the Shadow Isles. Because of his enormous sensory range even in his passive state, he was able to tail her without drawing her attention, though he did need to take strange detours to make it look like he wasn't following her in case she did sense him.

Thankfully, she never once detected him. The dense crowds certainly helped, however, part of it undoubtedly came from the fact that she was a Martial Senior. Seeing that made Rui want to remain more alert, the worst thing that could happen was that he would grow secure in his power and end up dying as a result.

In actuality, he felt more vulnerable, although he would be able to activate his Martial Heart before any force in the Senior Realm would be able to kill him thanks to a passively empowered instinctive reflex and senses, it was still unnerving when he wasn't using his Martial Heart.

The Squire Realm was the perfect upgrade, and while the Senior Realm was proportionally superior, it had more shortcomings than the transition to the Squire Realm did.

Chapter 1373: Judgment

A few days passed as Rui did his best to gather all the information that he needed on his target smoothly. He had to admit, the musician was definitely a good idea. Having play pieces that hit all notes across audible and inaudible ranges conveniently allowed her to accelerate the process of figuring out her innate resonance frequency.

It wasn't long before he got the right combination of the triple frequency in the right layers to bypass the layers of the head to hit her brain.

As always, he chose to assassinate her when she herself was out and about fulfilling a commission.

The best time to strike his prey, was when his prey was about to strike its prey. Their minds were consumed by their target, making it less likely that they would detect threats to their own life.

That was why one moment she was walking on a bridge towards her target, a famous public figure with Squire-level security detail, and the next moment, her consciousness faded and her body collapsed, falling into a rapid river below the bridge, before being swept away beneath the powerful rapids.

Nobody bothered to try and save her, not even the Martial Artists who could.

That was within Rui's calculations.

After all, this region just wasn't that kind of place.

Two Martial Seniors down, several dozen more to go. He was satisfied with his progress. It had been ten days since he returned from training and two of his assassination targets were already dead.

That was progress.

Funnily enough, because nobody knew that the disguised woman who fell into the river was actually a Martial Senior, nobody had known that she had died.

She just disappeared.

"Tsk, Damn Sele. She didn't even finish her commission. She's making us look bad."

"We have received a complaint, a demand for a refund, and appropriate compensation."

"But where did she go?"

"Maybe she left the Shadow Isles to go somewhere else. She was ranked close to the bottom of Martial Senior assassins after all."

Suddenly, a Senior-level aura washed over the two conversing members of the Daelgul Assassination Service.

"She did not abandon us." The Martial Senior narrowed his eyes. "She was taken out. She would have been back now even if she failed in her commission which she wouldn't have."

This drew a gasp from the two of them. "Could it be...?"

"Yeah. It's that same bastard who took out Sam."

Many had come to suspect the connection between the two cases. It wasn't hard to link them. After all, there were some commonalities. For one, once again, they were killed before they could put up a fight or resistance.

"Furthermore, Sam was definitely the weakest of all the Senior assassins in the archipelago, Sele may not be the second weakest, but she is very close to the bottom nonetheless. We may see some more of the bottom-ranking Martial Seniors be targeted, and that will definitely confirm the connection."

And confirm it did. In the coming weeks, several more Martial Seniors either disappeared or just apparently died out of nowhere.

It could no longer be denied. It could no longer be speculated around. The truth was clear to anyone with any intelligence. Someone was targeting Martial Seniors. From the bottom, making their way up the totem pole.

Many knew that it was probably time to nip the problem in the bud. In a room with many dignitaries, Martial Seniors, and a single woman at the head of the table, that was exactly what was being discussed.

"It's the beggar's sect." On Martial Senior spat with an angry expression. "Maybe I should massacre all the humans on this island that no doubt hide many of their spies just to shove it to them."

"Please abstain from doing that, mam." A high-level executive in the Crina Foundation sighed. "Not only would I rather not die, but you would be declaring war against the Beggar's Sect. It is possible that they may very well upgrade the Shadow Isles to a priority issue and deploy one of their few and scarce internal Martial Masters to wipe us all out. I highly doubt that the Silent Shadow will come out of hiding to protect us if and when that happens."

Although they resisted the Beggar's Sect, everybody in that room knew that the Beggar's Sect in its totality possessed the power to wipe them out. This was an organization that had led to the fall of a Martial Sage, largely through their ability to manipulate human civilization. A bunch of pesky Martial Seniors were no different from insects if the Beggar's Sect summoned its full might.

Thankfully for them, the Beggar's Sect was spread extremely thin since they made it a point to involve themselves in any and all matters across the continent. Which meant that they could only summon a smidgen of their full power for any one issue in a given region.

"That is the only reason that they haven't wiped out the Shadow Isles." One executive of Area Crina remarked. "They have deployed Senior-level forces against us before but..."

"Interesting." Skia Crina murmured at the head of the table, drawing everybody's attention. "Fighting fire with fire. Assassinating assassins with assassins."

A soft smile arose on her delicate elderly face.

An inscrutable emotion rang deep in the depths of her unfathomable eyes.

"Wait, we don't even know if the Beggar's Sect is involved." One Martial Senior remarked with a nervous expression. "I don't know if I want to fight them."

"Tsk, don't be a wimp." Another Martial Senior remarked contemptuously. "I don't care who is behind this. I care for the actual individual or individuals who eliminated Sam, Sele, Bayron, Gilles, and Artor. Whoever this is, it's clearly an elite veteran high-grade Martial Senior who has dedicated their entire life to the art of killing."

Many nodded across the table in agreement. The sheer quality of the assassinations meant that there were only a few candidates at the highest echelons of the Senior Realm.

"A veteran who has dedicated their entire life, hm?" Skia Crina murmured, drawing everybody's attention. "Is that really what you all see?"

Nobody knew how to respond to that, even as a knowing smile spread on her face.

Chapter 1374: Plans

Several waves rippled through the Derschek Region and the Shadow Isles. For the first time in a long time, the Shadow Isles experienced more emigration than immigration. The Martial Squires and the Martial Apprentices weren't dumb.

Five Martial Seniors were assassinated back to back, roughly once every five days. There was no common pattern in the allegiances or loyalties of the Martial Seniors as far as the organizations that they had joined went. There were no common patterns in any regard except for the fact that they were at the bottom of the informal rankings among the Martial Seniors.

Many subscribed to the hypothesis that an assassin was targeting all the Martial Seniors of the Shadow Isles. Many further extended that subscription that the assassin was targeting all assassins and was beginning with Martial Seniors. Perhaps if and when this assassin succeeded in killing all the Martial Seniors, they would move on to the Martial Artists of the lower Realms.

If that were to happen, they were undoubtedly screwed. That was why there was a group of particularly fearful Martial Artist assassins that actually chose to leave the Shadow Isles.

Unfortunately, they didn't know that Martial Seniors were not allowed to unscrupulously bully particularly large numbers of the Apprentice and Squire Realm unless in retaliation to a provocation or an antagonization.

Funnily enough, while the Panamic Martial Federation enforced this rule, it also enforced a rule that prevented Martial Apprentices and Squires from learning of this rule.

Martial Seniors were to be respected and feared.

Thankfully, it worked in Rui's favor.

What didn't work in his favor was the fact that the Martial Seniors began finally waking up to the threat that Rui represented after the fifth victim.

The biggest issue was that despite retaining the corpses of three bodies, a cause of death had still not been established. Rui's incredibly delicate care ensured that he dialed down the force even further to prevent the truth from being discovered.

He had managed to walk an incredibly thin line successfully, optimizing the outcome in his favor.

Without knowing the manner in which he was killed, the other Martial Seniors could not be on the lookout for this particular manner of assassination. They couldn't take the appropriate measures to protect themselves.

The only other pattern that existed aside from the Martial Seniors being at the bottom of the totem pole was the fact that they were killed when they were out on assassination commissions.

The moment this pattern was discovered, several Martial Seniors took an indefinite hiatus from undertaking assassination operations, much to the dismay.

"Tsk, what a pathetic excuse for a Martial Senior you are, Sonel." One woman snorted when she heard of this.

"You only get to say that because you've been in the Senior Realm strong enough to not be immediately targeted, Riya." The man replied coldly.

"If you're that terrified, then why don't you partner up with another Martial Senior?" Riya asked. "That way, you'll have more of a reassurance. Some of us have already begun doing that."

"I don't trust anybody else to protect my life."

The fear of being assassinated had already begun hindering the Shadow Isles.

"Things are unfolding within my calculations," Rui remarked calmly as he read through the transcripts of confidential conversations held between important individuals in the upper echelons of the assassination sector of the Shadow Isles.

"It is?" Professor Carl asked as he organized several more documents for Rui.

"Death is powerful, but fear of death is much stronger," Rui replied. "Getting rid of Martial Apprentices and Squires without killing them would have been a challenge if not for the fact that they are terrified of Martial Seniors, as they should be. The best part is that the fear is affecting the Martial Seniors as well."

"What did you intend to do about the Martial Seniors that have ceased undertaking commissions?" Professor Carl inquired with a curious expression.

"I'll kill them, of course," Rui replied with a composed tone. "Not immediately, it's more convenient to eliminate the Martial Seniors that still have the courage to undertake commissions. It will be a little challenging if they do partner up with another Martial Senior. But I can't indicate that this is any sort of hindrance, otherwise, they will all start relying on this method."

"And how do you intend to fulfill your end goal of learning out the assassination sector all by yourself if they rely on grouping up with each other.?" The man inquired.

"I will create an environment that is simply untenable," Rui replied calmly. "I've looked at all of the profiles that the Beggar's Sect has prepared on all the Martial Seniors. Each of them is deeply individualistic. Not just in a Martial Art sense, but also in a conventional sense. They are solo players and are unaccustomed to grouping up for a common goal. The fact that there hasn't been a single joint operation in eight years only proves that. They are not the type that can handle being paired and grouped in groups of more than two."

The professor understood where Rui was coming from. "So you don't need to kill them if you end up making it better to leave than to stay."

Rui nodded. "That's the most convenient way to rely on assassination to wipe out the entire assassination industry. Furthermore, by not touching those who decide to leave the Shadow Isles and the Derschek Region forever, I am making leaving a clear and attractive option. Eventually, they'll be inclined to."

"That's a very level-headed and practical plan." The professor murmured. "All the internal Martial Seniors we have deployed, all the external ones we have commissioned. And to think this annoying problem is shaping to be solved by a single Martial Senior."

Rui shrugged. "It's not that big a deal."

Professor Carl simply stared at him. Memories of the many years that he and his colleagues had to deal with the disruptions to their operations by the indiscriminate assassinations flooded back to the man's mind.

Such a nightmarish problem that seemed impossible to solve without deploying a Martial Master was now very thoroughly being beaten back by a single Martial Senior. He began to understand why the regional head had personally beckoned Rui to join the Beggar's Sect. Given the sheer ability of a Martial Senior as young as him, he would very well be an incredibly powerful asset in time.

The dynamics of the Derschek Region shifted as a small chunk of the less committed assassins left the region and the Shadow Isles, unwilling to get tangled up by what was clearly a veteran Martial Senior assassin targeting them.

The supply of assassins was reduced by a little, increasing their scarcity and driving up the prices of the assassination services.

"We have already measured a nine-percent decrease in the number of commissioned assassinations per capita across all Realms across a ten-day time period." The professor exclaimed.

"That's good, but it will need to plummet much more than that," Rui remarked. "Still, considering that the median prices of assassinations across all Realms have experienced a slump after only five assassinations. It has given me a good picture of how entrenched the assassination industry is. Unfortunately, for my next targets, killing a single Martial Senior will not be nearly as effective as it was the first five times."

"What do you plan to do then?" Professor Carl asked.

"I eventually plan to take out the few Martial Seniors that have grouped together in a pair in hopes that that will deter me from killing any of them," Rui replied as his tone grew sharper.

"I will show them that they cannot deter me with such a trivial measure. If they want to hinder me, they'll need to huddle up like they're homeless on a freezing winter night."

"Isn't there a chance that one of the duo might be able to survive your assassination attempt and reveal the manner in which you kill your targets?" Professor Carl asked.

"It's impossible to kill both within the same assassination," Rui admitted. As much as he wanted to claim that such a thing was trivially easy for him, he would be dishonest in doing so. "However, I can definitely kill one of them."

"So you're saying that it is inevitable?"

"Yes. I haven't reached a level where I can continue preventing them from learning anything about my assassination style for too much longer." Rui replied. "I'll take out as many individual Martial Seniors as I can, but once I reach the duos, the secret will spill, unfortunately."

"How will that affect your plan?"

"I've already accounted for it." Rui calmly reassured him. "Once I whittled their numbers down, and also demonstrated that simply pairing up is not going to save them. One of them will die, and the other may escape for a while, but not for too long."

"What if the one that survives pinpoints your location and then decides to attack you?" Professor Carl. "Because you're the youngest Martial Squire, your Martial Heart and Martial Body are probably going to be weaker."

"Ordinarily, you'd be right in saying that this would be a severe threat. However..." Rui smirked. "I am not an assassin. Despite my recent accomplishments, I'm at my strongest in a head-on fight. On top of that..."

His eyes narrowed. "...I'm at my strongest when I'm prepared for my opponent."

Although Rui had avoided doing this in recent times, he was far stronger than his baseline power level when he had a predictive model on his opponent built from the get-go. He could massively outperform his usual strength and was truly a menace to deal with in such a case.

On top of that, his opponent was an assassin, someone who specialized in covertly eliminating targets through preparation.

Assassins thus weren't as good at head-on unprepared combat as they were at assassinations. Thus even if Rui killed one of the two people in a pair, and the second surviving Martial Senior managed to pinpoint the location using that assassination. Rui was not nearly as concerned because they would be forced to confront him in his specialty, while he was fully prepared and at his strongest.

"Once I succeed in assassinating one of the two that belong in a pair, and defeat the second one in head-on combat. They will understand that they cannot survive me without extreme measures." Rui calmly

concluded. "Of course, in most cases, the second surviving member of a pair would rather not fight their assassin head-on because the latter is prepared for them while the reverse isn't true. But even still..."

It was enough.

"So you've planned everything."

"Close to." Rui shrugged. "It's not possible to account for every variable, but I've processed every iota of data within the sect's library of intelligence on the assassination industry of the Shadow Isles and this is the best plan that I can think of. It's impractical to try and kill every assassin one by one. Scaring most of them off with an unspoken ultimatum and threat to their life is the most efficient and effective path forward."

Professor Carl nodded. "The regional head has authorized full-fledged cooperation of the branch with you and your operations. We have commissioned many Martial Seniors before. None have managed to make anything more than insignificant progress before leaving because they were compromised or killed. This is unprecedented."

Rui smiled as the excited professor rattled on.

His thoughts turned to his true objective in the Shadow Isles.

The Silent Shadow. She left hints of it every time she accepted a new pupil, a sign here or there. It was a way of reminding people that she was still alive and still judging those who sought her.

She hadn't accepted a pupil in quite some time, according to reports. And Rui grew increasingly convinced that it was the lacking qualities of the assassins who sought her. If a true assassin eliminated the hurdles in their way, then Rui as he was right now was the poster boy for such an archetype.

If not even that was enough to gain her approval then...

He shrugged inwardly. 'I tried.'

He shook his head before getting up and leaving.

"Where are you heading off to now?"

"To kill my next victim, of course," Rui calmly remarked, donning his mask before heading out.

That day, yet another Martial Senior fell, stoking the flames of the crisis that had beset the assassins of the Shadow Isles.

Chapter 1376: Off

"This is why I told her to pair with me!" One Martial Senior gritted his teeth. "But she said no, and went and got herself killed! How many Martial Seniors must fall before it becomes clear that we are dealing with a high-grade Martial Senior?!"

The man's words rippled across the table. A table featuring high-level executives, chairmen, directors, and Martial Seniors.

High-grade Martial Seniors were rare. Because the depth of the Senior Realm was considerably greater than the Squire Realm, the difficulty of reaching the high grades was as proportionally high as the difficulty of becoming a grade-ten Martial Squire.

Just because there were five additional grades above the tenth grade did not change the fact that grade-ten Martial Seniors could dominate any Martial Senior below them. A high-grade Martial Senior assassin was a terrifying foe to face if one was not that deep within the Senior Realm.

"For now, I believe it is prudent for all remaining Martial Seniors to start pairing up." A director of Navar Assassination Guild spoke. "Although it does not bolster defenses too much considering this assassin has bypassed the senses of a Martial Senior in their passive state indiscriminately, it does serve as a greater deterrent."

"Unfortunately, it is constrained by the fact that an assassin can prepare for retaliation from the remaining Martial Senior as well." Another high-level executive sighed. "In that case, it is better to

increase the number of Martial Seniors huddled up together. Perhaps three or four in a group. Ideally five. In fact, it is best to have all the Martial Seniors of each assassination organization stay together at all times."

"I don't tolerate my peers well." One Martial Senior hissed coldly. "I operate solo. Always have, and always will."

"He's right." Another remarked. "I don't do 'together'. I only joined a guild so that annoying menial management work can be taken care of by skilled people."

"I don't trust them." Yet another remarked. "I don't trust any of them. I would rather rely on, at most, one person that I have personally vetted."

"Speak for yourselves. I don't want to die!"

This sentiment largely continued to echo around the room with little exception. The powerful egos, distrust, and entrenched solitary temperaments typical of assassins prevented them from coming together and huddling up without caring for silly things like pride.

The normal humans in the room could only sigh in resignation. Although they were heads of the top assassination organizations of the Shadow Isles and the Derschek Region, they did not have any power over the Martial Seniors of their respective organizations. Being too antagonistic with them could potentially cause them to leave and join one of the top assassin organizations in the room.

Although they had gathered in the room to deal with a common enemy, they were not friends.

"Lady Crina." One man remarked. "Please, talk some sense into them."

Everybody in the room glanced at the elderly woman sitting at the head of the table. She appeared to be the gentlest grandmother anybody could ever hope for.

The type that would gently tuck their grandchildren into bed.

Yet there was a depth in her eyes that they did not notice.

A depth deeper than what they were capable of comprehending.

"I am not an assassin," She remarked gently, sipping some tea. "I trust assassins to know how to deal with their fellow peers better than anyone else."

She glanced around at everybody at the table with a soft smile. "Why don't we trust them to do what they do best?"

The many human officials of the various organizations did not look satisfied with her response, yet the Martial Seniors around the table expressed approval.

"As expected of you, Lady Crina. You understand us best."

"We should endeavor to find a way to assassinate this upstart."

"Ha! That is the only thing we can agree on."

The Martial Seniors were delighted that they did not end up being pressured into measures that they did not wish to take. They would rather find and kill their targeter themselves than huddle up with others that they did not trust to protect them.

The various officials in the meeting could only sigh helplessly as their Martial Seniors drove them down paths that they did not wish to go down, yet were powerless to help.

"I propose we set up a joint intelligence task force to gather information on our target." One official suggested. "Even if the Martial Seniors refuse to cooperate too deeply. Our organizations can pool our resources to find and combat a common enemy."

The other officials in the room nodded thoughtfully. "This is a prudent measure. Given that we unanimously agree. Let us finalize the matter in this meeting while we are gathered here."

Soon enough, the Shadow Intelligence Task Force was constituted. A network of intelligence-gathering resources and manpower was soon put in place, and its operations began.

Yet, it wasn't long before Rui got a hold of the transcripts of the entire meeting.

"What do you think?" Rui asked the professor calmly. "You're senior intelligence analyst. How good is this SITF that they have set-up?"

"It's shit." The professor snorted. "At least, by our standards. It's pretty decent otherwise."

"Hmmm..." Rui nodded. "Things more or less went as I expected except for a margin of error of around seven percent. Namely..."

His eyes narrowed. "Lady Crina... Based on the conversational dynamics, her soft and hard influence is extremely high. She could have compelled the Martial Seniors to go for the sensible route and work together and defeat a common enemy. Yet she didn't... For someone whose alleged goal is to find the Silent Shadow, she was remarkably hands-off about the entire issue. Almost as if she actively did not want to interfere even though I am surely a threat to her goal."

"What are you trying to get at?" Professor Carl asked.

"You said that the Beggar's Sect conducted a thorough investigation on her that lasted seven years, right?"

"Indeed. I was personally involved in that investigation." Professor Carl remarked.

"And there was nothing suspicious about her?"

"Not at all. We found nothing."

Rui narrowed his eyes. Not only were her actions not logically consistent with her alleged agendas and profile and the model of behavior that Rui had constructed on her, but even his instincts told him something was off.

Chapter 1377: Final Stage

Time passed on, one way or another. Rui continued to prove the threat that he posed to the various Martial Seniors of the Shadow Isles. The ones that refused to pair with even a single person, let alone an entire army, simply died.

Rui hunted them all, one by one. Whether they left their homes or not, as long as they were alone, they turned into targets for Rui. Once every five days or so, a Martial Senior fell without fail.

The SITF kicked into full force as the investigative body scoured through the Shadow Isles and the Derschek Region, looking for any clues about the mysterious Martial Senior that had been eliminating the assassins of the Shadow Isles.

And yet, they failed at every step of the road. They were unable to discover the means by which their Martial Senior assassins fell. They were unable to discover a smidgen of the identity of the person who eliminated their assassins.

The individual Martial Seniors who didn't partake in a pairing system all died. The only exception applied to those who left the Derschek Region permanently, which a few of them did. It appeared that leaving the Derschek Region was a clear-cut way of escaping being a target of the mysterious assassin.

When they learned of that, the Martial Seniors of the Derschek Region would have been lying if they hadn't considered it.

A few months had passed and it wasn't long before every Martial Senior who didn't rely on the pairing system had passed away.

Half of them disappeared.

The other half died inexplicably.

No clues in the surroundings of the corpses. No sign of resistance, conflict, or struggle. No clue about the means of assassination.

Nothing.

The Martial Seniors who had hoped that the SITF would uncover the truth about the force that was targeting them had their hopes crushed. The truth never came out, and ultimately, nobody ever found out.

It was truly the ideal killer, and they were truly the ideal murders.

The impact of the death of the various Martial Seniors on the Derschek Region was immense.

For the first time in decades, the region experienced momentary stability and peace as the prices of assassination services rose significantly.

The reason for this was that while some Martial Seniors didn't have the courage to be around any longer, the same was even more true of Martial Squires and Martial Apprentices.

The logic was simple. If there were threats to their kind that even Martial Artists of a higher Realm were unwilling to face, then they had no business sticking around. If the Martial Senior ever decided to wipe out the Squire or Apprentice populations, they stood no chance.

The event was so significant that it even got its own name.

The Shadow Boycott.

Word of the Shadow Boycott spread through the Derschek Region and even beyond. The assassin that had reaped so many of his kind drew even more attention.

The assassination community beyond the Derschek Region grew interested in a powerful figure that came out of nowhere. Because of how few Martial Seniors reached high grades, many organizations and groups within the assassination community that documented the powerful and prominent assassins that had a particularly notable impact created a new profile for the latest assassin to join those ranks.

The Voidreaper. He who reaped and left nothing behind.

Rui narrowed his eyes when Professor Carl informed him of that name.

For some reason, he always got hit with an epithet that had the word void in it. When he was in the Kandrian Empire during the Martial Contest, he had been dubbed the Voidbringer.

When he was in the Shionel Confederation, he had been dubbed the Voider.

And now, he was being called the Voidreaper.

In this case and perhaps even the previous one, neither of those names even made sense when people didn't know about his Martial Art in both cases. If people didn't know that his Martial Art was called the Flowing Void Style, there would be no reason to call him the Voider or the Voidreaper.

Yet they did.

It was a strange phenomenon.

Almost as if somebody ordained it to be that way.

Still, he wasn't complaining. He didn't mind it given that it did match with the theme of his Martial Art.

Regardless, he didn't have time to focus on such matters. Three months had passed and he had executed his plan with perfect accuracy and precision like a well-oiled machine.

Develop a predictive model.

Discover the innate resonance frequencies.

Eliminate.

Over and over.

He came to discover that every Martial Senior had different a unique set of innate resonance frequencies, much to his dismay. However, humans possessed very similar innate resonance frequencies due to the relatively minimal divergence in human bodies compared to Martial Bodies.

That made his job more challenging, but he didn't let it hamper him nonetheless.

At the end of three months, he had killed eighteen Martial Seniors. They were the stubborn individualist types who refused to be intimidated to leave the Derschek Region or pair up with their peers.

He had reached an important stage. Taking out the paired-up Martial Seniors would be necessary for eliminating the competition and cleaning up the assassination industry.

If he couldn't, then as crippled as the assassination sector was, it would still survive.

However, if he did successfully assassinate them despite the pairing security system, then he would push them beyond a certain limit.

The limit that they were willing to tolerate to stay within the Derschek Region. If he could prove that not even a buddy system was protecting them, then he was sure, based on the models that he had created from the intelligence profiles that the Beggar's Sect had on them, that they would leave the Derschek Region, unwilling to take even more unpleasant measures to survive, and unwilling to die.

Having purposely left the option of leaving open, it would seem like the only option.

But only if he could succeed in this final stage. The most difficult part.

Chapter 1378: Double

Senior Jeanno and Senior Kaylin got into position as they focused on their target. A well-protected duke accompanied by a Martial Senior.

It was time.

BAM BAM!

One of them appeared before the guards stealthily distracting them for just a moment with an attack, while the other appeared behind the target.

SPLAT!

The target's head fell off in a matter of microseconds. The two of them disappeared as the Senior-level guards were stunned both by the appearance and their failure to protect themselves.

They immediately retreated, racing away together.

Ordinarily, they would undertake such a mission alone, but they had been one of the first Martial Seniors to pair up when the Voidreaper began killing their peers a season ago. They had faith that being together would ensure that the Voidreaper would not dare attack them for fear of revealing his means of killing.

"Good job." Senior Jeanno glanced at Senior Kaylin with a smile sometime later.

It took merely a millisecond for that smile to turn into an expression of horror. Senior Kaylin's eyes were rolled back, and his head and body were already on their way down collapsing.

His heart was not beating.

The emergency reflex passively boosted by the Martial Heart kicked in within microseconds, activating into full glory out of pure reflex with passive techniques. Senior Jeanno instantly activated a breathing technique to barricade himself.

THWOOM!

The man's eyes widened as he felt a soft sound projectile crashing into his Senior-level defenses harmlessly, aimed at his head.

'Sound...?'

He realized he may have inadvertently figured out the most important secret of the dreaded Voidreaper.

His survival instinct kicked into full force.

He needed to survive.

He needed to survive no matter what.

His Martial Heart blazed at full power as he maintained his air defenses before sprinting away at to speed. He employed a maneuvering technique that allowed him to sharp turns and curved trajectories without much of an impact on his top speed.

And yet.

THWOOM THWOOM THWOOM!

"Argh!" He grimaced in shock and pain as three Senior-level attacks landed on him with the precision and accuracy of a surgeon. Yet despite his swiftest efforts to get back and lash back into retreat.

WHOOSH

His eyes widened as he beheld Rui's figure stepping before him. A soft grace accompanied his movements. A calm aura of power radiated from him as his Martial Heart burned from within.

The man's Martial Heart was dimmer than his own, yet Senior Jeanno instinctively knew.

He felt it in his heart.

'I can't win.'

And yet he couldn't run.

He wasn't allowed to.

BAM!

An incredibly swift kick to the head dizzy.

BOOM!!!

A remarkably heavy blow to the gut with Reverberating Lance crippled his ability to breathe.

POW!

And yet, the finishing blow was a swift uppercut, crashing into the man's jaw.

THUD

The man collapsed to the ground, losing consciousness as the blunt force trauma to the brain exceeded a critical threshold. Yet Rui was not content, he used Death's Sympathy to push it further, crushing it from the inside out.

Instantly, he disappeared.

As much as he would have enjoyed sticking around, he couldn't. His sharp senses had already picked up vague hints of a flurry of Martial Seniors converging on their location. He immediately activated his Mind Mask, before quickly heading to the nearest population collection.

He had purposely worn ethnic attire that was common to this region so he would not have any problems blending in. He had also avoided his mask because it would draw too much attention.

Thus there were risks taken. However, they were calculated risks, and the probability that he would succeed was high enough to warrant taking the risk. And it turned out that he was right.

Not only had he prepared a solid predictive model, but the state of mind of his opponent in addition to the fact that he was not strong in head-on straightforward combat allowed Rui to dominate even though he was younger in the Senior Realm.

Just minutes later, several Martial Seniors had arrived at the scene.

Some of them bore the emblems of assassination organizations in the Shadow Isles, and some of them bore the crest of the duchy whose duke had just been assassinated.

They regarded each other with hostility.

Yet, they stayed their hand.

None of them wanted to get into a meaningless brawl at the moment. The Martial Seniors from the duchy inspected the corpses of the assassins who killed their duke with vindictive satisfaction.

The assassins of the Shadow Isles happened to be not too far away, by Martial Senior standards, and had come to check up on the conflict that had ensued, in hopes of having struck gold and run into an assassination attempt from the Voidreaper.

Yet, they merely ended up with the worst outcome. They stared at Senior Jeanno's corpse with grave expressions, and their senses picked up Senior Kaylin's corpse some distance away.

This was bad.

Really bad.

The Voidreaper didn't appear to care even the slightest that they had grouped up together.

Not only did he not care, but he had the power and the ability to kill both Martial Seniors in a remarkably short timeframe. It wasn't just the fact that he was good at assassinations, it also meant that he was incredibly strong in combat.

They immediately began racing in the direction of the Senior-level pressure and vibrations. And yet it had only lasted a few seconds. In a matter of seconds, the assassin confronted Senior Jeanno, beat him down, and then killed him.

This meant that there was an incredibly large gulf between them in overall power. The theory that the Voidreaper was a powerful veteran Martial Senior held even more credence. They knew that none of them were capable of defeating and killing Senior Jeanno that quickly and dominantly.

It meant that the assassin was an extremely powerful Martial Senior who had taken decades to hone himself in all regards.

"Damn..." They gritted their teeth as they considered the consequences of this event.

Chapter 1379: Unworthy

Unfortunately, they couldn't do anything. They quickly headed to gather the corpses of their peers.

Yet the Martial Seniors of the Duchy had other ideas.

"Those corpses belong to us." They growled. "They will be displayed to our people."

"You think we're just going to give you them?" A Senior assassin snorted. "You're lucky we're not killing you."

The tension spiked between the two forces.

"How about we each take one?" One of the Martial Seniors from the duchy proposed.

This wasn't an unattractive idea. None of them wanted to fight at the moment. The assassins from the Shadow Isles were most afraid of the Voidreaper coming for them at any moment.

The buddy system proved to be entirely useless against the Voidreaper as he could comfortably demolish duos. Even if he couldn't kill both of them in a pair, one was guaranteed to die, which meant that there was a chance that any of them could die at any moment.

This was especially the case since he wasn't that far from this location.

Perhaps he was watching them right now, preparing to take a shot.

Just the thought of it sent a chill down their spines. It made them want to end this conflict and get out of there.

"Deal." The assassins remarked. "We'll take this one. No compromises there."

They quickly collected Senior Jeanno's body before heading back to the Shadow Isles in a hurry.

Rui heaved a sigh as he felt the distant presence retreating.

His mind immediately surged into thought as he analyzed and processed his current circumstances, extrapolating and predicting the future.

The first inevitable outcome was that they would learn more about Death's Sympathy.

This was within his predictions of inevitable outcomes. There was no way to kill both Martial Seniors in a pair without giving away some hints about the limitation of his technique.

With just some deductive reasoning, one could conclude that his technique could not be fired too quickly in rapid succession, since he wasn't able to land a Death's Sympathy before the man's Martial heart activated.

Another clue that could be derived was the fact that he could not cleanly assassinate his opponent using Death's Sympathy when they had active wind-based defenses up. This was a little bit more complex, but they most likely knew that Senior Jeanno had an active wind-based defense.

Unless there weren't any seductively intelligent analysts, it wouldn't take them long to conclude that those wind-based defenses kicking into action were most likely what protected Senior Jeanno from being assassinated. Either that or the Martial Heart.

From there, it could be further inferred that the technique was exclusively an assassination tool and not something that worked against someone in combat mode. That also explained why the Voidreaper needed to engage Senior Jeanno and beat him down before killing him with the technique.

Rui had modeled hundreds of potential tactics and strategies to prevent the disclosure of this strategically important, yet none of them allowed him to prevent his targets from learning at least this much.

However, he wasn't too concerned.

'What are they going to do?'

They couldn't keep the Martial Heart permanently active, that was extremely impractical. They also couldn't keep up a wind-based defensive technique all the time either. That was quite impractical as well, even with potions.

It was like asking someone to keep jogging for the rest of their life in order to stay alive.

An absurd demand.

One possibility was keeping up wind-based defenses around their residential area. However, that protected them only while they were inside their homes. The second they stepped out, they were walking targets.

There was no practical solution.

Nothing they did, or could do could allow them to remain and maintain a normal meaningful life.

There was one solution, of course.

"Leave and never come back." Rui mused.

He had avoided putting so much as a scratch on the assassins that left the Shadow Isles. The ones that stayed back knew that their former colleagues and seekers had gotten away harmlessly and relocated to start working somewhere else.

it was an attractive choice if there was anything that held them back, it would be the reason they came to the Shadow Isles in the first place.

The Silent Shadow.

Yet when was the last time they actually thought about the Silent Shadow? When was the last time they actively exerted themselves to earn her approval?

They had all long become dependent on relying on the efforts of Lady Crina. They simply dedicated a portion of their earnings towards her investigations and forgot about it.

Instinctively, most of them had all come to recognize the truth.

They were unworthy.

It was harsh, but there wasn't much else to conclude. Especially when some of them had been around for quite a long time. It was clear that this simply wasn't working out.

The reason that they stayed nonetheless was because the Derschek Region was a boost to their ego.

In the Derschek Region, assassins were kings. They were at the top of the food chain. They decided who lived and who died. They were the main characters.

This was not the case across the continent where assassins had a more discreet and clandestine presence.

They came for a boost in power, they stayed for a boost in ego.

Perhaps the only assassin of their Realm that hadn't followed in their path was the Voidreaper. An assassin who didn't care for the glory of being feared and respected like a ruler.

Whatever his goal was, he was accomplishing it by assassinating, as assassins did. Compared to them, he was cut from a different cloth.

Perhaps, if they were like him, they might have been able to earn the approval of the Silent Shadow. Even now that they had come to make this insight, they still didn't have the drive or the fire to

implement it. They would rather run away from the mess than do what they did best to overcome tribulations.

And that was why they were unworthy.

Chapter 1380: Exodus

At a meeting around a large table, a tense atmosphere brewed at the recent set of events.

"So not even a pairing system can make the Voidreaper even hesitate." One woman heaved a sigh. "We need to increase the number of people huddling up. The more people stick together, the harder it becomes to assassinate."

This time, the Martial Senior assassins didn't find it nearly as easy to clap back. The actions of the Voidreaper had shocked them all. They didn't expect that he would blatantly jump into actual combat.

Not only did he do that, but he also crushed one of them with an incredible dominance that was deeply intimidating. Yet when they thought about having to bunch up together like pathetic weaklings, more than they already had, a deep sense of unwillingness rose in them.

Was there truly no other way to avoid becoming a victim of the Voidreaper?

Actually, there was.

"I wanted to take this opportunity to announce to all of you that I will be leaving the Dangan Assassin's Guild..." One Martial Senior announced to the entire room, surprising them.

A Martial Senior leaving an assassin organization was not a matter relevant. Assassination organizations frequently fought over Martial Artists, especially Martial Seniors, and the announcement of leave was an opportunity for the others to swoop up and claim the prize.

"...And also the Shadow Isles forever."

The last part turned the atmosphere grave. The Shadow Isles had already bled a lot of assassins to emigration due to the initial wave of terror that the Voidreaper had caused.

The ones that were in the room at the moment were the ones that had resisted and had remained in the Shadow Isles despite that. The fact that some of them were beginning to throw in the towel was not a good sign for the assassination industry.

"Now now..." One man coaxed them. "Let us think this true, Senior Srira, perhaps you haven't given this all the due consideration it needs. It may be best to-"

"Sorry, but I also intended to leave." Another Martial Senior remarked, interrupting the man. "The Shadow Isles has been one of the best regions that I have worked from and in. However, the Voidreaper is not a threat that I can ignore, nor a threat I can protect myself from. It is true that we have learned more information about the Voidreaper, but what we have learned only scares me. It may sound pathetic to all of you human officials, but I didn't reach the Senior Realm by picking fights I can't win."

His voice was decisive and firm.

Unfortunately, his reasons were irrefutable. It was true that they had learned more about the Voidreaper based on the fact that the assassin had engaged in head-on fights. It was also true that they had gained more reason to fear him.

One of the prevailing presumptions was that as long as they could find the Voidreaper, their Martial Seniors could crush the assassin with numbers. However, the sheer dominance and speed at which Senior Jeanno was defeated indicated that this assumption was not necessarily true.

It significantly constrained their potential solutions. The only real solution was heaping up all Martial Seniors together, but even then, how could they the assassination?

The Voidreaper could simply take them down one at a time even if they were heaped and simply retreat if they tried tracking him. That was why it wasn't really feasible to deal with him this way.

Unless they could figure out a way to defend the Martial Seniors from the man's assassination, there wasn't really a viable game plan at hand.

"Wait, we can hire an external third party that specializes in anti-assassination measures." One official stated.

"And embarrass ourselves as assassins by relying on anti-assassination security groups?" One Martial Senior snorted. "No thanks. On top of that, if that measure was enough, then we wouldn't be in such a tough place at all."

"It's also not viable financially," Another official sighed. "These security groups usually cater to the wealthiest class. It's going to eat away at our profits making the very business of assassination unprofitable. We might as well pack up if we decide to rely on this measure."

"At the end of the day, there is only one truly alluring escape to this predicament." One Martial Senior remarked. "Leaving. Those that have left this region are still in contact and are perfectly fine. The Voidreaper has not pursued them. I don't want to die, so I too will be leaving."

This sentiment made its way across the Martial Seniors on the table. Not many were able to resist it this time.

"You're all pathetic!" One Martial Senior declared. "Are you all so eager to throw away your pride as Martial Artists? Hm?"

The man drew attention as stood up, chastising his fellow peers. "I will resist the Voidreaper and overcome this tribulation!"

He radiated confidence and power, giving the human executives of the various assassination organizations some hope.

Two other Martial Seniors also nodded in approval. "We too will stay. The rest of you losers can leave."

The others simply shook their heads before getting up and leaving the room. "Good luck."

Many chairs were left vacated as they followed through in a mass exodus. The various human executives and leaders of the assassination organizations could only heave deep sighs.

This was a calamity. It was a catastrophe for the assassination industry that they had collectively developed. Decades of progress had been undone as their greatest foundation grew undone.

"Shame..." Lady Crina murmured as regret seemed to beset her. "Perhaps we could have done more."

One human executive shook his head. "No, my lady, we have done everything we can, for the most part. What matters is what we do from here on."

A wave of agreement spread across the various leaders. Although the emigration of assassins was a huge setback, it wasn't as though the world was over. There were still a lot of assassins left in absolute numbers.