

Just then, a strong, loud voice echoed across the facility from atop the stage near the opposite end of the room to the entrance.

"Welcome to the 106th annual entrance exam of the Martial Academy..." A man who looked to be in his fifties spoke. He had a long salt-and-pepper beard, and a bald head. He wore luxurious robes over a simple Martial Art uniform that spoke to his position within the Academy. The most distinctive feature about him was the most intangible one; the weight of his presence. Rui could feel it. Every single applicant could feel it. They all even realized they experienced the same pressure, when everyone began stiffening up or showing other signs of anxiety, fear and discomfort.

('He's not even doing anything special.') Rui smiled nervously as he began sweating. ('He just gave the most generic and simple welcome.')

"... I am Master Aronian, a Martial Master and the Headmaster of the Kandrian Martial Academy, I will also be serving as your head examiner and invigilator." He continued, ignoring the applicants' reactions.

('So this is a Martial Master... Incredible... This is fucking amazing.') Rui grew more and more excited. How could he not? The man was more hundreds of meters away and his lungs were powerful enough to talk loudly enough without any aid. He was that far away, yet his presence alone was so heavy that Rui felt as if he was staring a bloodthirsty, man-eating tiger in the eyes point blank.

('He could kill us all in under a second, if he wanted.') Rui's instincts told him.

"The exam will have three rounds. Each of the three rounds will require you to complete one or more tasks. The exact conditions and stipulations of passing and failure maybe left to the discretion of the individual invigilators evaluating

your performance for the third round particularly. The first round and second round however, are objective."

('So, the criteria for passing the third round is not objective, that may make things tricky. Different invigilators may measure your capabilities differently, but why is the first and second round different?')

"We will begin the first round shortly." Master Aronian said, raising his hand. Immediately, thousands of Martial Artists entered the facility and got onto the stage with boxes, followed by a hundred distinguished looking Martial Artists.

('They have a heavy presence, though not as severe as that of Master Aronian. Martial Seniors maybe. It makes sense, Master Aronian isn't going to administer the test personally. We applicants are not worth his time.')

Once the hundred Seniors had finished spreading out on the gigantic stage and their assistants finished setting up a simple looking table with boxes behind them and railing leading down the steps from them. Master Aronian continued.

"The test will now begin. Within each of the large boxes placed on the table, are the passes for the second round of the Exam. Your objective is very simple; You must walk over to the Martial Senior standing in front of each box, shake their hand... and request them for a pass, all rapidly within ten seconds."

Master Aronian paused for a second, indulging himself in a smile. "Those who can complete the aforementioned objective will receive a pass to the second round, those who cannot, will irrevocably fail the first round as well as the exam altogether. Good luck."

He walked away, having completed his duty.

('Huh...?') Rui was gob smacked. He could sense that each and every single applicant save a small minority were just as confused as he was. He, like a lot

of others, decided to wait it out and see what happened. There was obviously more to this than met the eye.

Rui watched with great scrutiny as the first applicant walked up the stairs to the stage, through the railings. But just as he reached the stage, he froze.

('Hm? Why did he stop?') Rui glanced at the Martial Senior that the applicant was facing before realizing what had happened. magic

('Bloodlust.') Rui sensed the emotion the powerful Senior was practically radiating. In fact, all the Seniors had begun doing just that. The applicants at the front of the queue had frozen in fear, unable to approach the Martial Senior. Ten seconds later, The Martial Squires assisting the Martial Senior began declaring applicants' failures.

"Applicant 00504; failed."

"Applicant 10756; failed."

"Applicant 65784; failed."

"Applicant 45786; failed."

...

"Applicant 00037; failed."

('I see. I get it now.') Rui realized. The first round was a test of fortitude and resolve. Martial Seniors were exploiting evolutionary neurology and psychology to evaluate the applicants.

All sentient life had evolved to evaluate danger, risks and threat. This was an evolutionary psycho-genetic trait that allowed for species in ecosystems to survive, it was a well-documented phenomenon of evolutionary biology in his previous life.

This included even the smallest of animals like insects to the most powerful of dragons and phoenixes that existed in this world. All of them were able to

evaluate danger subconsciously from observation and intuition. Based on how high the danger was evaluated to be subconsciously, their minds would experience a proportional amount of fear.

The first round of the exam utilized this neuro-psychological phenomenon in testing the applicants. The Seniors were not literally radiating some magical energy field that induced fear, they were merely exploiting the candidate's instinctual, sub-conscious danger evaluation to induce crippling fear in the applicants. This was a piece of cake for the Martial Seniors, considering the applicants were basically kids. In fact, they even held back their bloodlust and didn't seem to go overboard. They needed to see how far each applicant could be pushed.

('Specifically, they're testing our resolve and our determination.')

A million applicants applied every year, each of them was driven by different motivations. Glory, money, prestige, ambition, power, duty etc. The first round tested the strength of the applicant's determination to become a Martial Artist. The Martial Journey was an incredibly arduous and dangerous journey, if the applicants could not overcome this simple obstacle, they were wholly unfit to become Martial Artists. They would fail to reach even the Martial Squire stage.

('This test... I've undergone this test before.') Rui remembered.

The kidnapping incident was somewhat similar to this test, and he failed that test miserably. He'd sworn he never would fail ever again.

('This time... This time for sure!')