

"Applicant 11234; Kane Arrancar, pass!"

Rui heard, as he took a good look at the first applicant to pass the test and head out the exit with a pass. To his surprise, the kid was short, about as short as him.

('Woah, to think a kid my age would pass this test.') Rui noted, impressed. He decided to wait his turn until the queue shortened and most of the applicants failed.

('To think the first round alone would be this cutthroat.') Rui mused. Though it was to be expected to some degree. More than a million applicants applied to the entrance exam every year on average, there were only sixteen institutes with what should be around a carrying and training capacity of no more than a thousand or two each.

If the already existing students were factored in, that would yield an acceptance rate of around one-percent. Meaning the three rounds of the exam had to somehow whittle away ninety-nine-percent of all applicants. With that stipulation in mind, this brutal filtering made a lot of sense.

('That also means that each Martial Artist was effectively the most talented as well as the most determined and resolved of their generation.') Rui's respect and admiration for Martial Artists went up. He quietly observed the ongoing ordeal for quite a while, specifically observing those who passed the test. He was quite a distance so he wasn't able to discern their characteristics, but in general they had an air of solidity in them, they were people who had enough determination to overcome their primal fear of death.

('the question is whether I'll join them or not.')

Rui wondered. Yet for some strange reason he wasn't as nervous as he was when he'd woken up that morning.

('Weird, I was nervous back at the orphanage, but I feel serene now, shouldn't it be the other way around?')

"The first round will be ending soon, we urge those who haven't attempted the round yet to do so before the time limit ends, you will not be allowed to appear for the round once the time is up."

That prompted Rui forward. He saw multiple empty queues as all the riff-raff left with deflated spirits.

('...Maybe it's because I know?')

He walked forward nonchalantly, climbing the stairs step by step. Maintaining eye-contact with the Senior who would be evaluating his performance. Once he reached the top of the stairs, he stopped. He felt as if the air was prickling his skin, urging him to stop. He felt as if the ground had begun to incline upwards, denying him entry. He felt as if the world itself barricaded his path forward while instinctual fear shackled him back.

('What a horrifying feeling, so this is the bloodlust of a Senior. It's millions, if not billions of times scarier than the man who nearly choked me to death...')

He looked down at his quivering fingers. It was almost as if his body had begun fearing it of its own volition. He clenched his fists, as if to forcefully imbue courage in them, before walking forward at a steady pace.

('Maybe it's because I know...')

He reached the Senior.

('...that this isn't enough to curb me!')

He glared at the Senior with defiance, even as his jaw clattered. His legs felt like they were turning to jelly. His limbs felt like an electric current ran through them. But he pushed forward, going so far as to crush his tongue to combat the fear.

('I WILL become a Martial Artist.') magic

Before bowing to show respect, defiance could be tolerated, but disrespect would not.

Rising back up, he calmed down as his expression returned to neutral.

"Senior, may I have a pass to the second round?"

The man stared deeply into Rui's pitch-black eyes, before breaking into a smile.

"Of course." He acquiesced, handing Rui a piece of paper that, written on it was a declaration of his right to appear for the second round of the 106th Kandrian Martial Academy entrance exam.

"Applicant 30947; Rui Quarrier, pass!"

With that, Rui made his way to the exit at the end of the stage heading down the path indicated by signs until he reached a facility. Within it, of course, were the applicants who passed the first round.

('There's still like a few thousand of 'em.') Rui inwardly tutted. He'd hoped there would be fewer, resulting in lesser competition. He knew that the real competition would start from here, all the people who made it to the second round were built different from the wannabes. Everyone in the room eyed each other, knowing exactly this. Rui drew a fair bit of attention himself because of his youth and his pitch-black hair and eyes, though he didn't care too much, it was something he had long grown used to.

The training room they were in was rather strange, it was basically a giant hemisphere. There were also several panels located all across the hemisphere as if they were meant to serve as hatches from which things could be dropped into the training facility.

('Hm, that's eerie.')

The training hall confused him because he couldn't understand why it had such strange architecture. It couldn't be easy to engineer and construct a facility with such a strange shape. It was also rather inconvenient in a variety of ways since it covered a lot of area on the ground but the net volume of the building was rather low in comparison to other conventional multi-story buildings. So why on Earth would the Academy bother going out of its way to construct something of this sort?

('It probably has something to do with the exam.')

Rui suspected, though he wasn't entirely sure. If this was the case though, there were multiple possible reasons for architecture he could come up with.

Suddenly Rui felt a familiar pressure interrupting his thoughts, he knew who it was before even confirming with his own eyes.

"Congratulations on passing the first round of the Entrance Exam." Master Aronian said, walking towards the applicants... "The fact that you stand here before me is proof that within each one of you lies a burning desire to become a Martial Artist, yet that is not enough. Will cannot alter your fate all by itself... It needs power. You, need power... The only question I have for each one of you is..." His eyes sharpened.

,m "Do you have power?"

His tone weighed on them, the answer to that question would decide the outcome of the exam.