

Rui could already feel the attention of his competitors on him.

"Man they're gonna come after us." Kane said, nonchalantly.

Rui had forgotten about his acquaintance; he had been too absorbed in the eminent ordeal awaiting him. Kane was also his age, furthermore, he had more points than Rui so he was a more attractive target, but having more points meant he would be harder to beat. Ultimately both their young ages meant they would be more alluring as targets.

"You sound confident." Rui noted.

"Yeah, the low rankers should be easy enough, but the high rankers are strong... I don't know if I can take their badges easily."

('... The fact that that was what was on his mind means he's not worried about losing his badge at all.') Rui sighed helplessly. He wasn't as confident as Kane; his lack of experience was not something that could be overcome easily.

"The most important rule of the third round is that the round will end when half the number of applicants lose a badge. With that, the explanation of the third round is over, we will begin the third round soon, good luck."

Rui narrowed his eyes.

('That rule is good and bad news. The bad news is that my attackers will be more aggressive now that there is a limit to the number of times a badge can be stolen. The good news is that I just need to hold out until the half the applicants lose a badge. Which will likely happen quicker, because I probably will last longer than the lower ranked applicants.') Rui concluded.

('My attackers will probably be mid or low ranked applicants. The higher ranked applicants have no need to target each other at all. Retaining their high scores alone will ensure they pass the exam. If they do bother stealing badges, they will likely target low-mid rankers who they will easily be able to defeat.') Rui continued analyzing.

('Another important thing to note is that the fact that the goal is retain and obtain badges, means that physical prowess isn't the only variable. Everyone has blind spots, regardless of how strong you are, and how strongly the badge seems to stick to your body, you could lose it simply by being a little careless.')

Kane nonchalantly hummed as Rui furiously evaluated his predicament and what course of action he ought to take.

"What makes you so confident you'll be able to retain your badge by the end?" Rui asked.

"Ahhh, that's because I'm already a Martial Apprentice" Kane responded.

"..!"

('To think this guy is already a Martial Artist, no wonder he managed to secure rank four despite being much younger than the top three rankers. I don't compare to him.')

"What exactly does it mean to be a Martial Apprentice?" Rui asked out of curiosity.

"Well, dad said a Martial Apprentice is someone who has mastered the foundations of the fields of Martial Arts and discovered their Martial Path, and manifested their Soul."

"Fields? Martial Path? Manifesting the Soul??" Rui asked, confused.

"Fields are like the fundamental different aspects of Martial Arts; Offense, defense, supplementary and maneuvering. These are the four primary fields that every single Martial Art must possess. Without offense you can never win, without defense you will always lose. And without maneuvering and supplementation you will not be able to use offense and defense in harmony. All Martial Arts need varying degrees of all four, no matter how little."

"HmMMM."

"And the Martial Path is basically the journey of cultivating and creating your own Martial Art."

"Wait, what do you mean by 'your own Martial Art'?" Rui inquired, puzzled.

Kane threw him a confused look at that question.

"Literally that, your own Martial Art."

"Wait, you're telling me every Martial Artist has their own Martial Art that no other Martial Artist in the world has?"

Kane nodded in response.

"Yep, father said that Martial Art is a reflection of people's very core, their very souls. Since every single human being in the world is different, every single person will end up having a unique Martial Art. That's also what I meant by Manifesting the Soul, it means you've discovered your Martial Art. It's a metaphorical thing my father kept telling me, it's a pretty confusing way of saying it if you ask me." Kane shrugged.

This was shocking to Rui. The notion that Martial Art was entirely personal and subjective and unique to every single Martial Artist was shocking. On Earth, there were a small number of martial arts that people learnt and combined, but to think that on Gaea, every single Martial Artist developed their own unique Martial Art was shocking.

And also, incredibly exciting. Rui fell in love with the concept of personal unique Martial Art that were metaphorical manifestations of one's soul. It was just so romantic!

(I wonder how my Martial Art will end up looking... A manifestation of my soul eh? I've always enjoyed all martial arts on Earth, they were all fun and interesting, putting aside their effectivity. I also enjoy striking and grappling combat equally. I can't really picture how my Martial Art will end up looking.)

"So what is your Martial Art like, thus far?" Rui asked curiously.

"I only reached the Martial Apprentice stage a little over a year ago, so I haven't developed it too much. But it will end up being a maneuvering centric Martial Art."

"I see... So that's why you were avoiding the bouncing slimes that well..."

Kane nodded in response

Just before Rui could continue asking more questions. Master Aronian declared the third-round begun:

"The third-round will begin the moment the doors shut close after I exit the facility. Good luck." The moment he said the applicants immediately put distance between each other and took a stance, waiting for the round to begin.

And with that, Master Aronian sauntered out of the room with lavish dignity, and as soon as the door shut close, chaos wreaked havoc.

(This is the final round! I'll hold onto this badge even if it kills me!)