

Daily life 331

Chapter 331 It's All On You Now

"I know we've only just met, and we have no capital to make you trust us, but He Shan, I think we should do so on this. My sister has always been good at these sorts of things, and her guesses, more often than not, have always been right on the mark," said Zou Yi with unconcealed pride in his tone.

He Shan paused for a second before he sighed in resignation as he said,

"Well, if we fail, we fail, and if there is something there, then it's our best bet."

"Where should we head?" he added, directing his question at Yu Mei.

"Not far, just up ahead at the corner of that maple tree," answered Yu Mei as she pointed at a Maple tree at one of the slanting corners a few hundred meters ahead.

Having only five minutes or less before the paralysis kicked in, they hurried ahead to the area Yu Mei heard the roar.

Even though they had already resigned themselves to whatever fate of what will be waiting for them there, they were all filled with trepidation. Even Yu Mei, the one who heard those voices had a concerned and worried look.

Their earlier experience was anything but easy. She and Zou Liqin almost lost their lives to the scarlet hummingbird, and Zou Yi still had a banged-up body from his clash with the willow tree.

Who knew what would be waiting for them at the origin of those animal noises?

Time seemed to slow down as the distance seemed to shrink. Three hundred meters, two hundred meters, one hundred meters, fifty, twenty until they were finally at the spot Yu Mei talked about with two and a half minutes to spare.

The area was....underwhelming. They arrived half expecting a white tiger to charge at them. Well, only He Shan expected this, but as for the rest, they expected an attack of some sort like what they had gotten from the snapping willow tree and the scarlet crown hummingbird earlier.

However, what they got was a gently flowing river, some cedar trees, short grass carpeted with fallen leaves, and shallow cricket noises. There was nothing remotely threatening in the area.

"Yu Mei, you're sure this is the place?" asked He Shan as he picked up a stone from the ground and casually threw it at a random tree ahead.

His actions drew gasps and glares.

"Sorry, force of habit," he said as he grinned foolishly.

"Yes, this is the place, though I can no longer seem to hear the sounds, either of the tiger or the other animals," Yu Mei answered as she looked around in confusion.

Moments ago, the sounds were as clear as day, almost as if they were being closely whispered to her ears, but now, she couldn't hear a peep.

Zou Liqin and He Shan cautiously looked around while Zou Yi tightly clenched his fists in an attempt to keep the frenzied side effects that were currently assaulting him at bay.

Despite looking around for almost a minute, they still didn't find anything that seemed remotely mysterious, ominous, or suspicious. Everything was the image of a mundane forest in Autumn and a river gently flowing with leaves on its surface being guided along.

"Why don't we jump in the river?" Zou Yi, who went to the extremes of even dunking his head in the water, suddenly said as he raised his head from the river.

His foaming mouth, beet red face, bloodshot eyes, fuming nose, and now add his wet hair. His current look did little to give the image of someone whose judgment could be trusted.

"Sure, why not?" said He Shan.

Zou Liqin thought He Shan was being sarcastic, but when she saw him test the waters with his hands and nod, she realized he was dead serious about it.

Are these two okay?

Zou Liqin tightly clenched the mallet He Shan gave her as she prepared herself to act.

The two of them were clearly delirious.

"I think we should jump. In all this time, as we made our way, the roar always sounded from the same spot. I think it may very well be in the water," said Yu Mei with labored breath.

Though mentally she seemed okay, her body could not escape the over-exertion being brought by the mushroom.

Zou Liqin looked at her before she gritted her teeth as she said,

"Fine."

The four, without hesitation, jumped into the river. The moment they did, the gentle river turned into a swirling whirlpool that slowly transformed into the maw of a tiger.

"Are you seeing this?!" He Shan yelled in fright at the sudden transformation.

"I can," answered Zou Yi in a worn-out tone. His consciousness seemed to be fading, and he wasn't alone.

The rest, the deeper they were dragged, the harder it became for them to stay awake. By the time they reached the bottom of the whirlpool, all of them were unconscious.

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"Liqin..Liqin...Liqin..."

Zou Liqin groaned as she heard the faint, indistinct voice of someone calling her name. Her ears felt like they were submerged in water.

She tried to get up. However, everything seemed to spin around the moment she did, and she found herself back on the ground with a nauseated feeling welling inside her. She shook her head to try and alleviate the symptoms of vertigo, but it only seemed to worsen them, and eventually, she found herself vomiting.

It took her almost five minutes before she finally felt mildly okay to crawl and carefully monitor her surroundings.

When her vision got mildly better for her to take stock of her surrounding, all she saw around her were trees whose height stretched as far as the eye could see, and below them was grass.

"Liqin.."

She finally saw the source of her voice.

"Yu Mei?!" she said as she hurriedly crawled toward her. That was when she noticed He Shan and Zou Yi lying on the ground, just like Yu Mei. However, they didn't seem to be conscious yet.

"Liqin, I heard; swallow, cricket, bull, crane, katydid, cicada, dragonfly, hornbill, swan noises as we came down. I think they're clues. It's all on you now..."

Just as Zou Liqin was about to rush to crawl to Zou Yi, she heard Yu Mei's faint voice before she fell unconscious.

Chapter 332 Zou Liqin's Struggle

Zou Liqin was left stunned when she saw Yu Mei immediately pass out after leaving behind sentences she couldn't make heads or tails about.

However, even in the confusion, she headed to her brother's side first to confirm his state. She heaved a sigh of relief when she confirmed his breathing seemed normal. He seemed to have passed out from exertion from his injuries, the side effects of the red suckle berserker fruit, and whatever effects the river had left on them.

She did try to wake him up after confirming his body was okay, but she got no response. She moved on to He Shan, who was a couple of steps over, but just like Zou Yi, he was knocked out cold and had zero response to her calls.

Finally, she decided to try her luck with Yu Mei, but Yu Mei was just the same as the two. She seemed to have held on by sheer willpower, and once she had delivered her cryptic message to Zou Liqin, she immediately passed out.

Zou Liqin's senses were still groggy, and anxiety began hitting her when she realized she was the only person who seemed conscious.

On realizing the precarious position she and they were in, out of reflex, she hurriedly searched for the mallet He Shan had lent her, which she luckily found wasn't too far from where she had woken up from.

She hurriedly grabbed it and ran to Zou Yi's side. She crouched on one knee, shielding Zou Yi's body to her back. After carefully positioning herself next to Zou Yi, she had the time to look around.

"Where are we?" she wondered as she cautiously looked around her.

They looked like they had been sequestered in a two-hundred-meter cylindrical patch of grassland, surrounded by trees too tall for her comfort.

Zou Yi tried to see their top but could only see a blinding white light and hazy leaves. She gave up trying to find out how tall the trees were when it started affecting her vision and making her dizzy.

Swallow, cricket, bull, crane, katydid, cicada....what did she mean by this? I still can't hear a thing.

Zou Liqin silently pondered on the last words Yu Mei said to her before she passed out. She looked around, hoping to find something that could correlate with what Yu Mei told her, but all she was met with was a regular forest grove and grass.

Maintaining her position next to Zou Yi, she stared at each and every tree that was close to her. Ten minutes passed by without her gleaning anything from them. Seeing she was getting nowhere, she looked at Zou Yi and the trees, seemingly debating about something before finally gritting her teeth and leaving Zou Yi as she went to the closest tree.

As she moved towards it, her eyes kept darting back to Zou Yi, afraid something would happen to him as she moved towards the tree.

Nothing seems distinctive about it,... muttered Zou Liqin as she traced her hand upon the bark of the cedar tree closest to her. She looked around it at the undergrowth and even plucked some of its leaves, but still, she didn't manage to find any clue that remotely resembled what Yu Mei was talking about.

Besides Yu Mei's clues, she was half hoping where they were was maybe the special zone Yang Qing mentioned. She could afford to let her guard down a bit if it was. However, she hadn't spotted an image of the bullfrog that was the identifying marker of an area as a special zone.

When she was done with that one tree, she moved to another while still ensuring to keep a close eye on Zou Yi. Almost one and a half hours passed with nothing to show for her efforts.

In those two hours, she had investigated over a dozen trees, and each was more thorough than the next. She even examined each blade of grass beneath them to confirm, and when that didn't show anything,

she dug up around the trees to see if the clues may have been hidden beneath the grass. The result was fruitless.

With every passing minute, her anxiety grew. She didn't find anything remotely valuable around her. Zou Yi and the rest had not woken up despite He Shan saying the side effects would last thirty minutes to an hour. The limit had long been exceeded, but they were still asleep, unconscious.

With how unnerved Zou Liqin was already, she couldn't even tell if they were asleep or unconscious or if they had been attacked by something as they were being swallowed by the river, leaving her as the only survivor.

Her breathing turned erratic along with her thoughts as she loudly muttered,

"You're in a test, you're in a test, you're in a test....." over and over like it was a meditation chant to help her calm down.

That mantra failed. Her eyes were bulging; she was shaking and pulling her hair as she walked around and around the circular patch of grass. She seemed to have reached the end of her mental tether when she plopped herself to the ground with a look of despair and eyes welled up with tears.

"You're in a test..." she softly whispered. It didn't sound like she believed it.

Despite regaining full mobility of her legs and balance, she crawled to her brother. She curled into a ball when she reached him and held his hands.

"Zou Yi, I know you always say I'm more talented than you and destined for great things, but you're the stronger one to me. I don't know if I would have survived the past five years if I had done it alone.

Before the test, I thought with what we have been through, I was finally brave enough to face any circumstance that presented itself, so you won't have to worry about me all the time, even at the expense of your well-being, and when Brother Yang Qing offered to let us take the test to join the Order, I thought to myself...this is it, a chance to show my brother that I can be brave, but look at where I am now..."

Zou Liqin's soft cries echoed around the silence of the grove, and with how hollow it seemed, the cries, despite being soft, were echoed around.

Chapter 333 Back To The Start

"I couldn't even pass the first test to the point I ended up this way. When you all need me, I can't even move or think without seeing it...

I know it was all an illusion, but I can't unsee my four years there. You dying but not seeing the body, the lives I took after, and..... Grandfather's look when he saw me do what I did before he died. It was one of remorse, regret, shame, betrayal. Seeing him look at me that way was just as hard as seeing you die.

Yu Mei told me the waterfall reveals what's in our hearts. From how you acted, it seemed like you saw Mom and Dad. This might be the first time I'm thankful I didn't get to see them; despite wishing for it for so long, I felt my heart break.

If they saw what I did, the lives I took, both innocent and guilty, they would be ashamed of me, just as Grandpa was. I'm glad you didn't see it too. To see your sister doing worse than what the black viper has ever done to us.

I'm afraid Yi. I'm worried that this is the dream and that those four years are real. I'm so scared when we meet Grandpa, he will look at me with those eyes, I'm afraid you will look at me that way too, and Mom and Dad, I wonder if they saw it too, their daughter turning into a bloodthirsty villain, and what about senior brother Yang Qing?

I can't help but hope we don't make it through the test because if we don't, maybe what I saw will never happen. I won't lose you like we did Mom and Dad, and Grandpa will never get to look at me with those eyes, and I won't have the lives of all those people on my hands.

Life in Purple City wasn't so bad, right, Yi?..."

A light chuckle echoed around in the groove, replacing the muffled soft cries from earlier.

"We can work for Grandpa and Grandma Wang at their restaurant, and with their identities, we won't have to worry about being bullied, and maybe with enough savings, we can open up the intelligence broker agency you always wanted. That wouldn't be bad.." Zou Liqin softly said as her voice trailed towards the end with some tiredness to it.

"I'm sorry, Yi. You won't be ashamed of me, right? At least you'll be alive," added Zou Liqin in a sleepy and tired tone.

Sounds of even breathing soon filled the area with the gently swaying of the branches of the trees and grass.

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Glowing respite valley, days before the entrance examination

"Can you believe it, Liqin!! We are at the Order, and very soon, we may very well join it," Zou Yi excitedly said as he held his sister's shoulders.

"Mmh," muttered Zou Liqin, equally as excited.

"I can't believe we are here, joining something bigger than the Zou clan. Brother Yang Qing said Grandpa was already let out and had sent a message informing him of our whereabouts, and Grandpa and Grandma Wang were also coming.

It all seems too good to be true. If only Mom and Dad were here, then it'd be perfect," said Zou Yi with a melancholic sigh escaping from his lips.

"I wish they were here," muttered Zou Liqin with sadness.

"Don't worry, we can go back to the clan when we make something of ourselves, clean their tombs, and tell them not to worry, that we are okay now.

Do you know Liqin..." Zou Yi paused as his gaze turned distant with a small smile.

"This is the first time in a long time since we lost them that I am actually looking forward to the next day and the day after that.

The future doesn't seem bleak anymore; we have something to look forward to. I'm almost afraid to close my eyes, only to open them and find this is all a dream.

Liqin, let's live. This is our turning point. From this moment forth, let's live for each other, for ourselves, for them, and for whatever the future has in store for us," Zou Yi said with a gingerly smile as he stretched his hand forward.

"Let's," Zou Liqin said as they tightly clasped their hands as some form of pact.

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"It seems I slept," muttered Zou Liqin as she dryly laughed.

"Thank you, brother, even in that state, you still find a way to help me...." Zou Liqin had a forlorn look as she said this.

"I'm still afraid, but we did promise to live, and I can't have you worry, or Mom or Dad, or Grandpa, and Grandpa and Grandma Wang.

You can do this, Liqin!! You're the daughter of the youngest blue-grade formation master the Zou clan has ever seen, and the daughter and sister of the biggest troublemakers the Zou clan has also ever seen," said Zou Liqin as she laughed in a genuine cheeriness, though was still touched by sadness and a little bit of anxiety.

"Now, which direction should I choose?" muttered Zou Liqin. She went to one tree and broke a small branch from it.

Just as she was about to toss it in the air, she stopped and walked closer to Yu Mei before she tossed it as she said,

"I hope you can lend me luck on this, sister Yu Mei."

The branch rolled around in the air, and when it fell, it pointed in the northeast direction of her.

"Is this a coincidence," she wondered. The northeast direction was the same direction Yu Mei had chosen when they were about to venture into the mountain.

Already resolving herself, she took out her coat and Yu Mei's and tied them together. She gently picked up Yu Mei, who was closest to her, and placed her on the coat; then she went for her brother and He Shan.

The trio fit perfectly on the tied-up coats. She checked the coat and them over and over to ensure they were tightly fastened to the coat, after which she breathed out to calm her nerves and started making her way in the northeast direction, dragging the coat with the trio with her left hand while her right hand tightly held onto the mallet.

She braved on step by step, carefully surveying all directions making sure they weren't ambushed, and looking for any clues that could be found.

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"Huh, why I'm I here again," said Zou Liqin in confusion.

She had barely been walking for ten minutes when she found herself in the same circular patch of grassland she came from. Nothing seemed off, and her appearance in the grassland seemed so natural that she almost thought it was a different grassland, but when she saw the area she had dug, she realized it was the same place.

"Of course, it wouldn't be that easy," she smiled as she smiled bitterly.

Just as she was about to choose a random direction and see if she would reappear in the same place again, she heard something that prompted her to raise her head.

"Are those swallows?" she muttered, somewhat unsure.

Chapter 334 Deciphering The Noises (1)

Zou Liqin was a bit unsure at first, but as more time went by and the sound didn't dissipate, she became sure what she heard were indeed sounds made by swallows.

She was bewildered by the whole thing, but then she suddenly remembered what Yu Mei had said earlier when she spoke about hearing the voices.

Zou Liqin gently touched her heart as she recalled her explanation of why she could hear those noises while Zou Liqin, Zou Yi, and He Shan couldn't.

The prerequisite of hearing those voices was for someone to have a sense of calmness. The latter two, i.e., Zou Yi and He Shan, were already suffering from the side effects of the red suckle berserker mushroom, which left them in an agitated state. At the same time, Zou Liqin had the four-year demons courtesy of the heart-cleansing waterfall to deal with, and even after when the trio had passed out, she was in a panicked and frantic state at being the only one conscious and overwhelmed by the weight of that reality.

"Turns out Mom didn't lie about the benefits of sleep," she thought as she smiled.

With the appearance of the swallow noises, it had altered the situation. Things seemed slightly more positive and hopeful than a few minutes to an hour ago. At least now she had something to work with. Even if it swallow noises she still didn't know how to use or make sense of, it was at least something.

Zou Liqin placed the trio down along with the coat as she decided to focus all her attention on the swallow noises.

"From what Yu Mei said, she heard swallow noises, cricket, bull, crane, katydid, and cicada.

Did the noises follow that exact order, or did she mention them based on what came to her mind first.."

Zou Liqin walked forward to pick up the stick she had used to select the direction she would go in. She gently sat down in a lotus position and proceeded to use the stick to write down all the clues Yu Mei had given her.

First were the voices she had, after which she added some of her questions, such as the order of the noises. Next, she went on to write a question in bold.

"Is this a formation?"

The experience from moments ago, where she walked a few steps only to reappear at this grassland, were indicators of the presence of a formation.

The fact that she couldn't even detect its fluctuations meant it was something above her current level of expertise, which meant she couldn't brute force it.

"Are the noises the key?" she wondered, increasingly feeling that may be the case.

She felt there was no way Yang Qing would put a formation so high level proving impossible to break through without leaving some clues behind, and maybe the noises were it.

Once she had written all she wanted to write and got her thoughts in order, she gently exhaled, inhaled, and then closed her eyes as she centered all her senses on hearing.

She submerged herself in the noise around her as she calmed her heart further. As she was writing her thoughts and making conjectures, she still had not heard any other noises apart from the swallows, which she suspected meant her heart wasn't completely calm.

She emptied her thoughts and committed her sole focus on the swallow noises. Her actions immediately bore fruit in less than five minutes.

The swallow noises that sounded like they came from all over the place and from a bunch of different swallows at different frequencies now had some order and uniformity to it.

The way Zou Liqin heard it, at first, when she listened to the swallow noises, it was all jumbled up, and it sounded like a thousand swallows were all making sounds trying to outdo each other.

As time went by, that cacophony of noises sounded less combative and more harmonious, and the number shrunk from a thousand to a hundred, and now it sounded like they were less than twenty.

Zou Liqin clenched her fists in excitement when she saw the results of her guess starting to show. However, that little burst of excitement made the noises turn a little bit chaotic again as the number of swallows making noises shot to fifty in an instant.

She hurriedly reigned in her enthusiasm and regained her calm focus. The number reduced, and harmony resumed. She couldn't tell how much time passed by, but the noise transformed into a melodic sound from just one swallow, and now she could accurately tell the direction it was coming from.

"Where are the others?" she inwardly wondered.

As if in response to her thoughts, noises from different animals immediately flooded her ears and seemed even to echo in her mind.

The sudden influx came as a surprise to her that she almost broke her concentration, but with clear results and a methodology to work from, she recentered herself as she slowly listened.

Instead of actively trying to force it, she allowed herself to be guided by it like a leaf gently floating on a river.

She thought this was the safest option for her since she wasn't sure if the animal noises had an order to them and if it would have an effect later. Therefore, it was better just to empty her mind of the choice and be guided blindly by the noises.

If that failed, she would isolate those noises based on the order Yu Mei gave her.

Just like before, the noises were so jumbled up that she couldn't even make how many different types of animals made those noises. This didn't deter her. She sat there silently welcoming it all in, and soon she could clearly make it out, and there seemed to be an order to it; first was the bull, then the crane, then the cricket, followed by the heron, then wolves, followed by cicadas, which were followed by katydids, then swans and finally ended with goat noises.

Zou Liqin was surprised when she heard more noises than Yu Mei did, and the order also seem different than hers.

She couldn't help but feel maybe she had assumed wrong, and Yu Mei randomly mentioned those names in the order of what she could remember and recognized, and as for the part about her hearing more creatures; Yu Mei may have heard them but didn't have enough time to mention them all, since she seemed to be hanging on by a thread by the time Zou Liqin had regained her consciousness.

Either that or the extra noises could only be heard once they were in the forest grove.

Whichever the case, Zou Liqin decided she would work with what she had on hand to see if it would lead her anywhere, hopefully out of the formation they were potentially entrapped in.

Chapter 335 Deciphering The Noises (2)

Since the noises were still chaotic, Zou Liqin decided to isolate each individual noise once she had confirmed their order by wholly focusing on one type of animal noise. She started with the Bull. Just like the swallow, at first, the noises seemed like they came from all over the place and came from many bulls. With her prior experiences, she calmed her heart and focused her ears on those sounds until the number was reduced to just one Bull, and the direction of the origin of the voice was highlighted.

Just like that, she isolated each and every animal voice she heard, from the Bull to the goat, as she made sure to confirm the direction each noise was heard from.

Once she was done, she opened her eyes and picked up the broken branch, and used it to draw a circle on the ground she had dug up earlier. She divided that circle into ten segments, and in each segment,

she wrote the name of an animal. She started with the swallow, then moved on to the Bull, crane, cricket, heron, wolf, cicada, katydid, swan, and finally, the goat.

Once she was done drawing, she looked it over once more to confirm everything was in the right place and then sat in silent contemplation as she examined the drawing.

"Mmh, some of these noises overlap in direction, even though only just.

Now how do I go about using them? Is there anything more to them other than direction?

As it stands, it still doesn't give a concrete direction on what I should do," muttered Zou Liqin as she cupped her chin in her palms while tracing her stick on the circle.

The noises she heard only gave her random directions that she still couldn't make use of. If she only followed the direction, she would end up in circles. She could only hope the clues she had were sufficient enough to shine a light on the next step.

She muttered to herself as she added notes around the map, and almost thirty minutes went by without her moving.

"Did I miss something?" muttered Zou Liqin when she saw even after an hour, she didn't seem like she was any close to figuring out what to do next.

"Maybe I did. It can't hurt to try again," she said as she closed her eyes in preparation to discern those noises again.

One minute, ten minutes, fifteen minutes, till finally twenty minutes passed by when Zou Liqin opened her eyes in shock.

"I can't hear them!" she yelled in shock, almost ruining her drawing as she hurriedly woke up.

"No, no, no, there must be something wrong."

Unwilling to believe that the animal noises she had just heard before had disappeared, she once again sat back in almost silent meditation to try and see if she could hear them again.

Ten minutes pass by with nothing but the breathing sounds of Zou Yi and the rest to keep her company.

She almost went into a panic again but quickly calmed herself down as she told herself to work with what she had. She struggled at first but was quick to find her rhythm as she wrote down every single idea that came to mind.

Once she was satisfied, she had written everything. She immediately proceeded to evaluate her ideas, as she debunked which were unfeasible and separated them from which were feasible. From the feasible ones, she meticulously went on to evaluate each and every one on their merits before she finally settled on the one with the most merits, which was to follow the noises.

With this as her focus, she calmed her mind as she recalled everything she had heard. It wasn't too difficult for her to do so. Luckily not much time had passed by since she heard the animal noises, and her ability to recall even the minute of details was one of her strongest qualities.

Time slowly passed, with the wind brushing on Zou Liqin as she silently dissected each and every voice she heard within her mind.

"The frequencies, that's it!" Zou Liqin hurriedly said as she got up and started scribbling numbers over each animal within the circle.

Swallow had (13) next to it, Bull had (8), Crane had (7), Cricket had (10), Heron had (14), Wolf had (21), Cicada had (3), Katydid had (5), Swan had (9), and lastly goat had (6).

Zou Liqin looked over the numbers once more as she did mental calculations of her own and muttered,

"96."

"I Should start off from there," she said as she pointed in the direction she had the swallow noises from.

Just like before, she grabbed the coat containing the trio in one hand while the other held a mallet and walked in the west direction of where she was, which she had deemed as the area she had heard the swallow noises coming from.

Once she was at the boundary of the grassland with the trees, she took a deep breath with eagerness in her step as she walked forward while counting numbers with every step she took.

"1.... 2...3...."

She slowly walked forward, counting every step she took from the moment her feet left the patch of grassland.

"Huh!! Why am I here again?! It's barely been ten steps..." yelled Zou Liqin in disbelief when she found herself in the same patch of grassland.

"No, the direction is right," she said as she recalled the noises the in her mind.

"Was the order wrong?" she wondered.

"Let's try the goat," she said as she took the southeast direction and started counting her steps the moment her feet left the grassland.

"Barely three steps," said Zou Liqin in frustration when she felt the scenery change, and she was once more back at the grassland.

"I'm missing something..."

After two failures, it was already evident to her that her process was wrong. Whatever confidence she had built from deciphering the noises was quickly crumbling.

She stood in utter silence as she went over everything in her head. It didn't take long before a look of realization hit her.

"I hope this works," she said as she fastened the coat holding Zou Yi and the rest to herself and walked in the direction she had started from, which was the direction the swallow noises came from.

Chapter 336 Taking A Leap Of Faith

Once she was at the edge, she exhaled as she sought to calm herself and then closed her eyes.

Immediately after, she started walking, with her eyes closed as she slowly counted her steps.

Once she was at the thirteenth step, she hesitantly opened her eyes and was pleasantly surprised when she found herself in surrounded by different trees, and the tree she stood in front of had a swallow perched on one of its branches.

"It seems this is the key," muttered Zou Liqin in excitement as she closed her eyes and turned to the left of the tree, and started counting her steps just like before.

She now walked eight steps before she opened her eyes, and in front of her was a small pond that had a bull drinking water from it.

A small smile appeared on her face as she turned towards the north of the pond and closed her eyes, and started counting her steps again. Just like this, she walked from place to place, counting a select number of steps before she opened her eyes, realigned her direction, closed her eyes, and counted her steps again.

She finally opened her eyes when she was next to a jagged cliff, and at the edge of that cliff was a silver-coated goat that jumped off the cliff and disappeared into the fog that had enveloped the whole cliff.

"Where do I go from here? There wasn't any other noise," muttered Zou Liqin in confusion as she dragged the coat containing Zou Yi and the rest to the position the silver goat had just jumped from.

Zou Liqin felt a frigid cold once she reached that position. She hesitantly went close to the edge to see if there was a way down, but all that met was white endless fog and a newfound fear of heights.

She hurriedly stepped back, almost as if in fear the ground below her would suddenly cave, leading to her fall and eventual death.

With no other options or way in sight, Zou Liqin decided to use the one thing that helped her get this far, hearing. Just like before, she closed her eyes and tried to sense if there was maybe a voice around the cliff or within the fog, which could point her way forward.

Almost ten minutes passed by with no sound. Zou Liqin started second guessing herself, that maybe her assumption was wrong, and hearing wasn't the solution for the way out of this cliff. However, just as she was about to open her eyes, she had this primal roar that shook her to her very core, and with it came a frigid coldness that froze everything within her, from her body to her thoughts, down to her very soul.

It barely took two seconds for her to feel she was about to die. However, just as she was at the brink, the roar and its effects disappeared instantly.

Two minutes passed by with Zou Liqin still terrified to open her eyes or move an inch from her position.

"What...what was that?!" Zou Liqin frightfully muttered when she got enough courage to open her eyes.

She touched her face, arms, and legs to confirm she was still intact. It was only after she confirmed she was okay that she dared look around.

She had no idea what the beast that made that sound was. All she knew was it was the incarnate of coldness, and never had she felt such a fear as she did now.

"Looks like it came from there," Zou Liqin said, fear still pervading her entire body as she stared at the white fog at the exact place the silver goat had jumped off from.

"But it can't be...."

Zou Liqin found it hard to believe the voice came from that direction, a bottomless abyss that would swallow them whole if they dared take a step.

She tried to recall the direction of the voice but was shocked to find she couldn't, no matter how much she tried.

She stood for quite some time in a constant debate about what to do before she finally sighed in defeat and then gritted her teeth as she firmly tied the coat containing Zou Yi and the rest to herself.

Once she was sure they wouldn't fall out of the coat or get unfastened from her, she slowly walked towards the edge of the cliff, her heart pounding with every step to the point she could feel its echoes in her ears and throat.

"There wasn't even a frequency to follow. How many steps I'm I supposed to take?" she muttered to herself once she was at the edge.

"Should I guess it?"

Zou Liqin was flooded with worry as she muttered over and over the number '96' in hopes something may come to her in the mutterings.

Sadly, two minutes in, there was nothing. No sudden enlightenments, all she had was a bottomless abyss calling for her and a stomach about to eject its contents.

"Brother Yang Qing set this test, and if he comes off overly cheeky, maybe this might be it...."

"I hope it's 12...." she added as she bravely took a step forward with her eyes closed.

She expected to plummet down with her first step, but she felt her footstep on a cloud of frigid coldness.

Still fully afraid, she took another step and another until she had taken 12 steps, which was when she stopped. She didn't dare open her eyes even after the 12th step.

Luckily for her, she didn't have to stay in fearful wonder if her guess was right or wrong because ten seconds after she made the 12th step, she heard the croaks of bullfrogs, and the frigid coldness that had surrounded her was replaced with gentle warmth.

With the sudden happenings around her, Zou Liqin hesitantly opened one of her eyes and was met with a gigantic tree with a bullfrog tree sculpted on its trunk that was croaking.

"The.... special...zone," Zou Liqin muttered, half choked up in tears and disbelief.

She passed out immediately after.

....

The peak of the Autumn Mountain

"Congratulations Liqin, you did well."

Chapter 337 The Special Zone

Yang Qing sighed in admiration as he observed the passed-out Zou Liqin. Her passing through the four cardinal ten trigram formation was worthy of his recognition.

The formation was a top-tier blue-grade formation which meant it could draw the energy of the dao of heaven and earth to create a sense of spirituality when it was activated. It could entrap and kill anyone at the palace realm and below, and if an early-stage domain expert was caught off guard, suffering heavy injuries was not an impossibility.

Yang Qing decided to use a miniature version of it since the original version required an ascendant-grade material and several top-tier monarch-grade treasures as materials to lay it down.

If he dared use such high-grade materials for a test that had a late-stage qi refinement expert as the peak expert, he had no doubt he would end up charged with over a dozen of fines for misappropriation of resources.

He thus decided to use a mid-tier monarch-grade artifact as the anchor and sky-rank resources as the secondary materials.

Even though the materials used and the formation he set up with the assistance of the formation hall was a downgraded version, it was still too much for participants below the foundation establishment realm to contend with. Even a regular peak core formation expert skilled in formations would die to it, let alone a bunch of participants with no much skill or power.

To help make breaking through the formation easy, Yang Qing deliberately hid the clues in the animal noises that appeared. The direction of their sound and the frequency highlighted the weak points of the formation, and as long as one followed it, they would make it out safely.

The final part was a cheeky thing he added to see if the participants were keen on details and if they were brave enough to take a leap of faith no matter how terrified they were. He had used a technique that could recreate the roar of a Xuanwu, otherwise known as the black tortoise. It held the same level of notoriety as a dragon, vermilion bird, white tiger, and phoenix.

The last part was a test of bravery and keenness to detail with which they could figure out the clue from the booklet he handed to them.

Zou Liqin's performance amazed him particularly because he wasn't sure she would be able to do it, especially when Yu Mei and the rest passed out, leaving her behind by herself. If it were before the test, Yang Qing would have thought her odds of passing through the formation were high due to how attentive and meticulous she seemed to him.

However, from the experience she had with the heart-cleansing waterfall and what it did to her, he had doubts whether she could do it, and the first one and half hours when she was spiraling showed there was a likelihood she wouldn't do it, but from the moment she woke up, she continuously surprised him with her reformed attitude. Though she still seemed as terrified as before.

....

"He Shan, are you sure you know what you're doing?"

"Zou Yi, you have the cheek to ask me that....Who wasted away seven earth-rank herbs, all for the sake of pretending they were a skilled alchemist?"

"I shouldn't have let you near them. What a waste..."

"It was only because the effects of the red suckle berserker mushroom YOU GAVE ME made me a little bit unstable, and are you sure we were only out for thirty minutes?"

"Why are you asking me? I was passed out the same as you.."

"Yu Mei, is something wrong?"

"DON'T TELL ME YOU'RE HEARING VOICES AGAIN?!"

"He Shan, you bastard, can you point that ladle carefully? You're wasting the potion."

"Now is when you're worried about waste..."

"You...you...you.."

"Zou Liqin is waking up..."

"Liqin, wake up slowly, don't strain yourself," said Zou Yi as he rushed to Zou Liqin's side, who was struggling to get up.

Zou Yi help her by her arms as he supported her up.

"Yi, you're awake?!"

Zou Liqin, who had a groggy look, shot to her feet as if a jolt of lightning was coursing through her body.

"You're awake.." she excitedly said as she sized Zou Yi up and down.

"You too... I'm glad to see you're all awake.." she bashfully said when she noticed the awkward looks He Shan was giving her.

"Thank you for protecting us and bringing us here...." said He Shan in a low tone.

He looked like he was struggling and filled with discomfort as he said those words.

"At least you have a conscience.." scoffed Zou Yi, which drew an angry glare from He Shan.

"Thank you, sister Liqin," Yu Mei said as she cupped her fists in gratitude.

"No, no, it is I who should thank you. If it weren't for your clue, I wouldn't have been able to figure it out," Zou Liqin hurriedly said as she bowed with deep gratitude.

While everything seemed like it had fallen into place for her, she wouldn't have entertained the thought of looking out for the animal noises had Yu Mei not mentioned it or insisted on it.

"Still, Liqin, you did great. It couldn't have been easy getting her....we finally found it, a special zone...Liqin, you can't imagine the things that are here. Reaching the qi refinement realm isn't an impossibility.." Zou Yi eagerly said.

Thanks to Zou Yi's reminder, she now had the time to observe the special zone. She had passed out before she could take it in, and now that she had the time, saying it was spectacular was an understatement.

The area still had a few trees around it with green grass below, but they all seemed more unique than the other trees and grasses they had seen along the way. They had a certain charm and richness to them that affected not only the air and environment around them as a whole but even Zou Liqin herself.

She felt her fatigue, both mental and physical, wash away with every whiff and glance she took. The area seemed to have been partitioned into different zones, with a few trees being used as the demarcation line.

One area had cauldrons, wooden tubs and was filled with all kinds of herbs.

"Did we collect all those herbs" she wondered as she switched her gaze to the other areas.

Another had a furnace and a working bench, and crates filled with all kinds of ores and minerals that Zou Liqin couldn't recognize, and another area had inks, slabs, and scrolls. Another area had a weapon rack filled with all kinds of weapons, and one area looked like it was a training area.

"Is this all for us?" she muttered in stupefaction.

"It seems so..." Zou Yi said as he admired the scenery with her. He still couldn't believe the special zone would be this stacked.

"There are ingredients, and over ten recipes we can use to achieve a silver body. Not only that, there are even a few that will help us reach the gold body and one that will highlight how to gain a diamond body..." Zou Yi said

"Too bad, the ingredients are not provided, and none of what we collected would work, not even putting into account the level of skill required to concoct such a herbal solution.." Zou Yi said with regret filled in his tone.

Zou Liqin walked with a zombie-like expression as she went to the area that looked like it had been specially set aside for alchemy. Her eyes gleamed in excitement as she took sight of the mountain of herbs arranged in different compartments.

While she couldn't tell what half of them were, she could tell by their grade they were all earth-rank herbs of the highest grade. Her hands went over to the cauldrons that were designed in the shape of a bullfrog.

There were three of them, and each had a different color to the other. One was earth brown, another dark grey, and the last one was yellow. Their qualities looked uniform, and there were small glyphs glowing around them, and below them, there were what looked to be coals that produced gentle white flames.

Just like that, she absentmindedly went around the different segments of the special zone, examining the different resources stored there. Every single area had the same level of resources, which was at the top tier of earth grade.

Only in the area with all sorts of weapons did she find a difference. The finished weapons stored there were made of mortal materials, and although their qualities looked exquisite, they were built for those with no cultivation base. She was sure if she dared smash the century iron pebble at them with force, a few of them would break.

The training area was what brought her the biggest surprise. She could feel herself calm down and her thoughts becoming sharper with every second she was there.

"This area...." she muttered.

"Was designed specifically to help us grow our strength in preparation to scale the mountain.." said Zou Yi.

When Zou Liqin turned to face them, she could see their spirits soar up with battle intent as Zou Yi said this. Even the calm Yu Mei had a gleam of battle intent flashing in her eyes.

"We will reach the top," yelled Zou Liqin, swallowed up by the atmosphere before she hurriedly closed her mouth in embarrassment when she saw the dumbfounded look the three were giving her.

"WE WILL REACH THE TOP!" the trio yelled seconds after and then they all burst out laughing.

Chapter 338 Choosing Arts (1)

After getting pumped up with the prospect of reaching the mountain peak, the team worked on the potions as they evaluated the different recipes they were given.

"We were out for almost three hours?!" Zou Yi suddenly yelled.

Curious, he asked Zou Liqin how long they had been unconscious. He thought it would be one hour or thirty minutes like He Shan had told them before they consumed the mushrooms, but three hours was way over what He Shan had said.

"Yes, it was three hours, I also thought something was wrong, but your breathing were normal.." Zou Liqin casually replied, which, despite the casualness, did little to ease Zou Yi's expression.

"You bastard, I thought you said one hour at most? How did we end up asleep for three hours?" Zou Yi asked He Shan with clear dissatisfaction in his tone.

He Shan looked just as shocked as Zou Yi was from the revelation. However, to not give Zou Yi the satisfaction of calling him out, he quickly switched his expression to one of calm seriousness.

"That's what Grandpa told me. Today is the first time I've ever tried it. The other times I couldn't take the risk since most of the time, I'm usually by myself during the hunts. Being alone and unconscious for nearly an hour is a risk I couldn't afford to take..."

"You...You...How careless can you be?" Zou Yi struggled to talk as he pointed his shaky fingers at He Shan.

He usually prided himself in keeping his emotions in check, especially in Purple City, where it was one of his tools of trade. Still, ever since he met He Shan, he struggled more and more to keep his emotions in check, i.e., mostly his outbursts.

Is the red suckle berserker mushroom still in my system?

He wondered when he saw how easily agitated he had become.

"I don't think Grandpa lied...Yu Mei, didn't you say you were the only one awake when we got swallowed by the river?.."

Yu Mei nodded at He Shan in response to his question.

"Maybe the river did something to us since Zou Liqin passed out too. Also, the mushroom works only if your body is at least intact, which you were not...You were just a pile of broken bones stitched together by some herbs.

How could a body in that state handle the potent effects of something like the red suckle berserker mushroom so easily? Aren't you thinking too highly of yourself?" He Shan mockingly said.

"Weren't you unconscious for three hours too? At least I had broken bones as an excuse. What's yours?" Zou Yi quickly fired one.

They went back and forth before finally, Zou Liqin intervened when the potion He Shan had been working on almost spilled over.

He Shan worked quickly as he threw a bunch of herbs into the bullfrog cauldron, which resulted in the mixture almost spilling over to simmer down.

"Which potion is he making?" asked Zou Liqn as she took out her handbook with the 108 steps of the autumn leaves technique Yang Qing had handed them before the exam began.

She flipped the manual to the page highlighting how to move from the bronze stage of the body refining realm to the silver stage. In that section, there were eight different recipes.

"We decided on this one... the Azure grace elixir.." Zou Yi said as he pointed to the recipe with that name.

Below it were the ingredients needed, the general description of the order they were to be placed in the cauldron, and how the finished product should look.

It was purposefully left out when it came to other matters such as measurement, how to process the ingredients, heat control, and other specific measures to be considered when brewing an elixir or potion.

Zou Liqin couldn't help but shake her head at this. The one saving grace was the ingredients written on the recipe had accompanying images at least. The recipe needed about 21 spiritual herbs and over a dozen parts from spirit beasts and mineral ores. Zou Liqin may have been born in a rank two clan that had no shortage of earth-rank resources, but looking down the list, she couldn't recognize half of the herbs and mineral ores, and when it came to the parts from spirit beasts, she was completely clueless about it.

"He Shan, you know alchemy?" Zou Liqin asked with genuine surprise in her tone.

She didn't mean to look down on He Shan. Still, alchemy was a subject that required an astronomical amount of resources to make any progress in, similar to artifact and weapon refinement or even the study and creation of talismans and formations.

Based on Shan's equipment and clothing, he didn't seem like someone who had access to a mountain-sized resource.

"My Grandpa may have been undependable in a lot of things, but when it came to the study of herbs and their application, he was a different person the clumsy old geezer who would get trapped in his traps would turn into a bottomless pool of wisdom when it came to alchemy and herbs, even the study of spirit beast and which parts are the most delicious.."

He Shan couldn't help but lick his lips with greed when he said the last part.

"As his sole student, while I can't match him, I know enough to get by, at least better than a certain someone.." He Shan smugly said as he cast a mocking side glance at the infuriated Zou Yi.

Zou Liqin couldn't help but chuckle seeing the reaction of the two as she threw a questioning glance at Yu Mei that seemed to ask:

παντας ηθνε | "When did they get so close?"

The team soon focused back on the brew He Shan was making. Zou Liqin, like a good teammate, offered to lend a hand, but after she was given a few pop quizzes by He Shan on her herb and alchemy knowledge, she was ruthlessly sent away when she showed herself to be severely lacking in these areas.

Though He Shan was gentler when he chased her away, unlike how he was with Zou Yi, which surprised her.

"Let him be. I can't wait for the cauldron to explode on his smug face.." Zou Yi venomously said.

Zou Liqin reserved her comments as she doubted He Shan would fail. While she wasn't skilled in alchemy, she had seen a few shares of good alchemists in the Zou clan, and when she saw He Shan and how he handled and processed the materials, she could tell he had exceptional skills. She knew Zou Yi could say to it too, which was why he had such a sour look.

His grandfather must have been a skilled alchemist. I wonder what grade he was in—wondered Zou Liqin.

"Liqin, Yu Mei, which techniques do you intend to use with the herb solution?" Zou Yi eagerly asked as his eyes shined with anticipation when he perused through his handbook.

"Look at all these techniques; fist arts, palm art, sword arts, leg arts, movement arts, spear arts...There are so many aspects of the 108 steps of the autumn leaves cultivation art to choose from.

I think I would be great with the sword.." Zou Yi valiantly said as he grabbed the tang sword next to the alchemy table and pointed it to the sky.

"Can you not fool around?" Zou Liqin said as she laughed at her brother's goofy look.

"Liqin, don't you think your brother has the skills to be an excellent swordsman.." grumbled Zou Yi with a pitiful expression as she put the sword away.

"We've already wasted close to five hours just making it here. Working on the fist, palm, leg, or movement arts would be better for us in terms of getting results in the shortest amount of time possible..." Zou Liqin said as she went through the arts concerning these four areas.

Chapter 339 Choosing Arts (2)

The art associated with the fist art was called the Flurry Waves fist art, while the palm art was the Withering Leaves palm art; the leg art was the sundering kicks of the blizzard, and lastly, the movement art was called the traceless leaf gliding movement art.

Zou Liqin had only perused the flurry waves fist art briefly, but just those glimpses were enough for her to know it would require a particular effort on their part to make any significant process with it.

If they wanted to make any significant qualitative progress in their short time, they could only do it if they focused on one aspect. Each of those arts had guidelines on executing them at different stages and incorporating them with their herbal solution to break through their body refining stage.

It had a step-by-step guide up to the gold stage of the body refining realm.

Zou Liqin analyzed each art on a surface level before she settled on the art she thought she would have better odds with.

"I will go for the fist art.." said Zou Yi.

"I've decided on the palm art. What about you, Yu Mei?" asked Zou Liqin.

Yu Mei seemed hesitant to answer at first before she awkwardly answered,

"I'm going with the blooming tranquil lotus meditation art.." said Yu Mei with the troubled smile of one afraid they would be scolded.

"Why?" Zou Yi asked with deep consternation.

The blooming tranquil lotus meditation art was only for strengthening and calming the mind, and it couldn't be used in breaking through the body refining stage.

All cultivators in the early stages of the body refining realm focused on honing their bodies. From what Zou Yi knew, this extended even to the qi refinement realm, where constant exercises and herbal solutions would strengthen and expand the meridians and acclimate the body to tolerate large volumes of qi. Only when one stepped into the foundation establishment realm would they focus on other aspects that didn't tie to the body.

Only when one was at the late stages of the foundation establishment realm would they start strengthening their spirit. Doing it before then would only slow down your cultivation, and training the spirit in the early stage was almost useless since the mental sea got unlocked when one was close to breaking through to the core formation realm.

The only people he knew who focused on honing their spirits early on were usually those with special physiques.

"Wait, could she..." Zou Yi's pupils constricted as his gaze fell on the awkward, smiling Yu Mei.

"If she does, then that explains a lot..." thought Zou Yi as he shook his head.

"Yu Mei, you don't have to answer. If that's your wish, then it's okay. We made it all the way here partly because of your efforts. If you feel that's the best for you, it's okay.." Zou Yi said as he gave her a smile of endearment.

"Many thanks, brother Zou Yi.." Yu Mei said as she cupped her fist, sighing relief.

She had been the first to regain consciousness and was ahead of the others by almost twenty minutes. Once she had confirmed the rest were okay, she looked around the place and discovered it was a special zone.

She had no skills in alchemy, weapon refinement, or other skills relevant to the partitions and resources provided, so she went through the booklet to try and increase her strength.

Other than her intuition, she realized she was practically useless and wanted to increase her strength so as not to be a burden to the rest.

Like Zou Yi, she mildly entertained the idea of trying the Soaring Swallow sword art recorded in the booklet. Seeing how demanding it was, she came to the same conclusion as Zou Liqin and decided to try and see how the other arts were.

As she was perusing, a calm voice told her to ignore the other arts and only focus on the Blooming tranquil lotus meditation art. The voice later told her not to tell the others.

While she did not know the voice's owner, she felt it had to be someone from the Order, especially when she didn't detect any malice from the statement. Since she was small, her intuition of any form of malice has always been strong, which was how she had been able to escape before her father sold her to a gambling den.

When Zou Yi asked her why she chose the art, she hesitated because she would have to lie to them. Even though they were a new team, she felt they were good people and didn't want to lie. Zou Yi's latter response came as a relief to her.

"What about you, He Shan?" asked Zou Liqin when she saw He Shan step away from the cauldron.

"With my sporadic fighting style, I think the movement art would suit me best...So which one of you wants to try the solution? It's already done," said He Shan as he eyed the trio, who reflexively looked sideways at his stare.

"How can you be cultivators with such an attitude.." He Shan said as he scoffed.

"Since none of you are willing, I will do it.." said He Shan as he poured the herbal solution into the wooden bathtub.

The liquid had the viscosity of water and a turquoise color. Despite the cauldron being smaller than the wooden bathtub, when He Shan poured the solution into the tub, it was filled to the brim, after which He Shan threw in an azure crystal that was in the shape of a teardrop into the solution and closed the tub with a cylindrical lid.

After confirming the lid was firmly in place, he took out his booklet and started going through the traceless gliding leaf movement art guideline.

The key to using the solution was first to practice the particular art until their strength had been overdrawn, then soak in the solution in which their body would hungrily absorb the nutrients in the solution to strengthen the body, then go back and practice the art again to help them in refining the solution better in every part of their body.

It needed to be done in four cycles before they could rest. The better they were in the art they practiced, the more benefits they extracted from the solution, which translated to how fast they would break through to the next stage of their body refining realm.

All members present, with the exception of Yu Mei, were all in the bronze stage and were trying for the silver stage.

Chapter 340 Traceless Leaf Gliding Art

He Shan frowned the more he read about the traceless leaf gliding movement art, but more than that, there was a fire lit in his belly, and he swelled in anticipation.

The Traceless leaf gliding movement art was versatile and had a tonne of variations which worked well with his combat style, which was sporadic.

He used arrows when convenient, switched to flying daggers when he finished his arrows, and worked with the axe when it came to close-quarter combat, though he was comfortable with a small sword just the same.

With how much he switched his weapon of choice depending on the battle needs, he required a movement art that could complement his fighting style. It was for this reason that he never practiced any of the movement arts that his grandfather bought for him. None of them fit his needs, but the Traceless leaf gliding movement art finally did.

The goal of the movement art required one to have the finest control of their body parts to the point they could use a single part to support the whole movement of the body. For example, using just a single toe to move the body while using minimal energy to the point they would not leave a trace on the ground hence the name traceless.

The technique placed great emphasis on the lightness of the step to achieve great agility, whether you were on solid ground, muddy ground, rocky ground, or even a pure water surface. As long as you practiced the technique to perfection, you could traverse all the grounds with the same relative ease and speed. One could even use a falling leaf as a springboard to launch themselves.

The variations of the technique deeply marveled He Shan, and the fact that it erased someone's traces was an added bonus to him as a hunter.

"The examiner did say we can keep the cultivation art and use it even if we don't make it through the examination. While I'm sure it's impossible to achieve great mastery over it with the short amount of time we have for the exam, maybe later, with a few years of practice, I could do it.

Its relevance even extends to the core formation realm. The examiner sure is generous." thought He Shan.

He immediately scattered any useless thoughts he had and poured himself wholly into studying the basics of the movement art.

Zou Yi and Zou Liqin also began to study their individual arts while Yu Mei went to the alchemy table with her booklet in hand.

"It says for maximum efficiency with the meditation art, I need the blind serenity lotus root.. I think I saw it here based on the illustrations.." muttered Yu Mei as she carefully looked around at the earth-rank herbs provided.

She carefully went through each of them before her eyes lit up when she saw a long cylindrical root that looked like that of a cassava, except it was white and spongy, looking like it was filled with fluid and a gelatinous coating.

Yu Mei carefully scrutinized it as she compared it with the drawing in the booklet before she nodded in satisfaction.

She took the root and went to the combat partition and sat in a lotus position, and immediately put the blind serenity lotus root into her mouth and gently chewed on it.

The gelatinous coating broke easily with her chewing, and a sticky liquid came out of it. It was sweet and had a cold stinging feeling to it. Yu Mei didn't swallow it but let it remain in her mouth as she chewed on it every four seconds.

Around the twentieth second, the sweet cold, sticky sensation turned to vapor that seemed to use the roof of her mouth as a path to reach her brain. She felt like multiple strings were cool to the touch and were attaching themselves to every cell within her brain.

She immediately took out her booklet and started chanting the mantra of the blooming tranquil lotus meditation art. At first, it was all gibberish to her, made no sense, and sounded like she was chanting words that required one to have a lot of saliva and a swollen tongue to pronounce, but with every cell that got touched by the cool string, those words started to sound familiar with every syllable uttered.

Unbeknownst to herself, a few minutes after she started the chant, her eyes turned pure white like she was blind, and her mouth stopped moving. Yu Mei thought she was still chanting the mantra out loud, but it was all happening in her mind.

The rest of her teammates had no idea what was happening with her as they were all busy trying to study their own cultivation arts.

Twenty minutes went by with none of them moving before. Finally, He Shan got up with eagerness in his eyes.

Zou Liqin and Zou Yi had their eyes closed as they internalized and replayed the moves of their respective techniques in their mind.

He Shan tensely walked over to the combat segment and made an effort to put as much distance as he could from Yu Mei, who was in silent meditation.

The combat area was the largest area, covering about four acres. This provided enough space for any of them to practice independently without interfering with each other.

He Shan took off his shoes and any other equipment he had on him till all he was left with was his beast hide clothing. The first step of the art was familiarizing himself with his own overall body weight, and from there, it would move to him realizing the weight of each body part and for him to be able to have as little on him as possible.

He gently jumped up and down a couple of times to get a feel for his body. Then he moved on to breathing. Breath control was one of the crucial parts of the technique.

The underlying concept in its foundation was simple enough, which was just inhalation and exhalation and making sure they were measured and in sync with each other.