

Daily life 301

Chapter 301 Going To The Institute

Enlisting Kang Huilang's help proved to be useful as they were done with improvising the cultivation art in almost 14 hours. Their individual expertise and cultivation bases played a part along with the target for the art, otherwise, it would have proven difficult to complete it in such a short time.

Yang Qing because of his background with his family, even though he wished he could block out much of his childhood memories, left him with a wide knowledge pool on the body refining stage and its different complexities.

Integrating his knowledge of the body refining realm and the 108 steps of the autumn leaves went on seamlessly, while Kang Huilang was easily able to come up with moves around the cultivation art.

They both had extensive skills and a plethora of experience in each of their areas and their high cultivation bases coupled with the low requirement of integrating the art for those in the body refining realm up to the middle stages of qi refinement, made the task easy to accomplish within that time frame.

"Thanks, Huilang," said Yang Qing as he prepared to leave for the Institute.

"Mmh, the other matter I will have finished it by the time you get back," said Kang Huilang.

He seemed to be intricately carving something into a cylindrical block of wood. His movements were slow and measured and his eyes closely trailing his every movement.

Yang Qing on seeing this left without saying anything else as he headed to the craftsmanship division first before he headed for the institute.

He didn't spend too much time there, and just left some instructions with them on what he needed and the timeframe for picking the finished product. The work he needed wasn't overly complex thus he didn't receive a backlash for giving a six-hour deadline.

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"This place still hasn't changed," Yang Qing thought with a rueful smile on his face as he stared at a large gate made of red dragon wood. It was intricately designed to look like it was made of intertwining vines and on both sides of the door from the center, there were two magnificently crafted images of two birds. One of them was a golden eagle and the other was a blue robin. Both birds symbolized justice and adaptability, respectively.

The blue robin was the Institute's respective symbol. Their aim was to train their students and increase their odds of survival for when they started working for the Order, which was why they placed great emphasis on adaptability.

Yang Qing walked in with a nostalgic look on his face as he took the sights in as he walked. There was no guard at the gate since there was a purple grade formation on the gate that read the soul signatures of those entering, and that was only one of the measures put in place.

In terms of importance, the Institute held more value than even the courtrooms and Requiem. The Institute was the lifeblood of the Order, without it, they would find it next to impossible to find cultivators good enough to handle the demands of its jobs. Therefore, it was also one of the most well-protected places in the whole of the Order.

As a student, Yang Qing had even heard of the rumor that there was a certain restricted area within the Institute that housed select members of the Spirit Council. Yang Qing didn't know how true the statement was, but he felt it couldn't be that far off because the Institute was just that valuable, that was even without taking into account the Main Library that was placed within the Institute's grounds.

However, that particular rumor remained unproven because of how enormous the place was. One had to move from one faculty to another through the use of spatial runes, otherwise, if they depended on their cultivation base, it would take them months, and there were dangerous zones between those faculties. Each faculty was its own territory, including even the Main Library.

Yang Qing wasn't sure how large the Institute was, but he was sure in his five years there, he had not covered half of it.

Yang Qing walked smiling, admiring the buildings and the history in them as he headed to the administration building which was the target for his visit.

On the way over he could see young students in black coats and orange robes who had eagerness, excitement, and a competitive spirit written over their faces. They curiously looked at Yang Qing before they went on their way.

Yang Qing soon spotted another group wearing the same robes. They had a sense of maturity to them both in their looks and demeanor. However, they had a haggard look to them. Yang chuckled when he saw them. He too was once like them. During their final years from the fourth year, the death combats would increase in number.

When it came to combat training, Institute students would fight against each other, the instructor, their seniors, and lastly convicts from Requiem who either had long sentences that would see them serve it to their death or those who were sentenced to death after a certain set period.

Those prisoners for a chance to reduce their sentence or have their duration of the death sentence extended would be given a chance at it by combating students from the Institute. However, because they were heinous criminals who shouldn't see the light of day, that option came with a catch, which was they could get killed if they lost the duel.

It was similar to the sentence Yang Qing had given to Peng Zhen. If the convicts lost, the battle would either end in their death or injury. If they wanted to avoid that, they had to fight with everything they had. They were encouraged to fight to kill the students. With death hanging over their heads and the potential of freedom or another day of life, fight they did, and fearsomely at that.

This method was the preferred method of choice when it came to training the combat sense of the students of the institute. They could get a clear sense of how life outside the Institute would be, which was why student vs student spars or student vs instructor spars were not done as much because it lacked the ferocity of a real battle where life and death were real stakes.

Awards and punishments were given in regard to a student's performance in those fights. In the early years they'd do it once a month but from the third year down up to the fifth year the fights would be three days a week, and the intensity would increase the further up the years, one was.

The fights were anything but easy. The instructors would monitor the fights and would not intervene until the student was at risk of death or being irreversibly crippled, as for everything else including losing your limbs, was something termed as acceptable.

From their looks, Yang Qing guessed they were in their third year. Even though they looked haggard they were not beat up enough. They still had some life in them.

"Yang Qing is that you?"

Yang Qing's thoughts were cut short by a call from a blue-robed man who looked to be in his late thirties. Yang Qing had a slight shiver when he saw him before he smiled obsequiously at the blue-robed man. He had to since that man was an instructor, a nightmare fiend in human skin to all who had the misfortune of having him as their instructor.

"Instructor Wu Shi, your heroic bearing hasn't waned one bit."

Chapter 302 Final Preparations

"Glad to see some things haven't changed despite you being a palace court judge," said Instructor Wu Shi with a light chuckle.

Yang Qing could only grin foolishly at this.

"So, are you here for a 'friendly' duel like your past seniors the moment they broke through to the palace realm?" asked Instructor Wu Shi.

Yang Qing flinched at the question before he answered,

"No, I'm not that crazy. I'm here to meet with the Vice Chancellor to agree on a few things. I will be the chief examiner for the entrance examinations happening tomorrow," said Yang Qing as he immediately smiled in embarrassment when he saw Instructor Wu Shi's unconcealed look of disbelief.

"They decided on you!?"

'What's wrong with me, I'm more than capable. Just you wait till I'm in the domain realm. I'll make sure to take good care of you then, just like you always took care of me.'

Yang Qing kept those thoughts to himself as he outwardly said,

"I know I'm still immature and unworthy of it, but I will work hard not to disappoint the Institute," Yang Qing solemnly said.

Even though he was essentially bootlicking and pandering here, he still meant those words. He was going to give his very best to ensure the standards of the Institute were maintained, which was why he didn't hesitate to use his own incomplete gold-grade cultivation art as one of the means or pay Kang Huilang 10,000 middle-grade spirit stones for his assistance.

"That I do not doubt, you did have one of the fewest loss records in your year after all," said Instructor Wu Shi with a look of approval and respect.

His statement drew looks of awe from the haggard-looking students who regained some life in their eyes as they stared at Yang Qing with gleaming eyes of respect.

One's records of defeat and loss were tabulated throughout all their five years at the Institute from the moment they begin their death duels with the convicts of Requiem.

They knew Instructor Wu Shi's temperament and methods of judgment. If he praised someone, they had to be of an outstanding caliber. Those worthy of his praise were those who were in the top 10.

Yang Qing smiled bitterly at this, despite the praise. Unlike others within the top 10, he didn't reach there solely because of this combat acumen. As long as you were not defeated, it would count as a win for you, which on loose definition meant even a draw was a win or out-enduring your opponent.

Yang Qing's physique was built for exactly that; durability and endurance.

"All the best, and do find us some good seedlings ones with the backbone to take a beating and still keep going," said Instructor Wu Shi.

"That was my exact intention," answered Yang Qing with excitement in his tone. He has always been a little sadistic due to how much trouble he got into over the years. It's in doubt if he even realized it himself.

In as much as being a Chief Examiner came with an opportunity to score a lot of merits, he also relished it for the opportunity to put his new juniors through the wringer.

Instructor Wu Shi on seeing the malevolent small grin appearing on Yang Qing's face, dryly laughed, said his goodbyes, and then left with the haggard students who had looks of pity on their faces for the new prospects.

It took a few seconds for Yang Qing to pull himself back from that reverie.

'I can't wait to get started,' thought Yang Qing in glee.

Using the administration office in the outer perimeter of the Institute he was able to access a spatial rune that took him to the central administration building where the Vice Chancellor was located.

Lucky for him, Vice Chancellor Wu Ling was around and he also had Dean Zhu Lao with him which came as a welcomed surprise for Yang Qing since he had plans for visiting him later once, he was done with the Vice Chancellor.

Even though extrapolating a cultivation art for those in the body refinement realm and those in the early stages to middle stages of qi refinement was not difficult, it did not hurt to seek the opinion of a skilled cultivator in the creation and improvement of cultivation arts like Dean Zhu Lao. He may be able to point out inconsistencies and mistakes that he or Kang Huilang may have overlooked and make the art even more refined.

Yang Qing quickly gave out an in-depth explanation of his plans for the examination including the measure Kang Huilang was working on, which he was surprised to see that Vice Chancellor Wu Ling and Dean Zhu Lao were in support of.

Yang Qing was fully prepared to list all the pros of the measure, however just after giving out the preliminary explanation, both seniors were in full support of it.

Once he was done with his explanation, he went on to show Dean Zhu Lao a copy of their modified cultivation art and also the 108 steps of the autumn leaves, for reference.

Like a cultivation art fanatic, Dean Zhu Lao was immediately immersed in the art and almost lost himself to it if it wasn't for Vice Chancellor Wu Ling's timely intervention.

The Dean didn't disappoint as he made a few improvements to the art, especially to the parts touching up on the early stage to middle stage of the qi refinement realm. After he was done, he asked to make a copy of the 108 steps of the autumn leaves cultivation art in exchange for a copy of an equivalent incomplete art that Dean Zhu Lao had on hand.

Yang Qing readily agreed to the deal and left immediately after to finish up the remaining tasks for the day.

The goals of coming to see the Vice Chancellor was to fill him in on his plans for the test and the other was to get the materials and approval of the place he would be conducting the test.

Chapter 303 Three Guests

The Institute had no shortage of places to conduct tests at, however other than things related to his time at the institute such as classes and the combat arena, Yang Qing was unfamiliar with areas unrelated to it such as areas set aside for the entrance examination, and for that, he needed the Vice Chancellor's help in addition to getting the necessary manpower and materials to set everything up.

He was left close to 12 hours before the test began, so he needed as much help as he could and the best way for that was through Vice Chancellor Wu Ling.

With his support, Yang Qing was able to find a suitable location and was able to source manpower from different departments both from within and outside the Institute such as the beast taming department, formation department, alchemy, and the like.

Within seven hours everything had been arranged and Yang Qing could finally rest easy for five hours until the beginning of the test. Yang Qing decided to spend that time at his abode. It has been a while since he enjoyed the comforts of the resource pit nest of the celestial nesting weaver and he also had to pick up the material Kang Huilang was working on.

'I wonder how Yi Jie is doing," wondered Yang Qing as he lazily stretched within the nest admiring the bullfrog totem in his hand. The totem was dark brown and was about the size of his palm. The statue was of a bullfrog performing a Daoist salute. It was plain and ordinary looking. The Daoist salute was about the only thing that made it stand out but even then, it wasn't by much. One could easily assume it.

Yang Qing grinned foolishly as he cast a deep gaze on the bullfrog wooden statue.

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Five hours went by quickly. Yang Qing had already made his way to the venue of the examination one hour prior and made a once-over check to make sure everything was in place for the examination.

Once he confirmed everything was in place Yang Qing set up a small round table filled with different fruits, meat dishes, and a wine gourd at the top of the mountain underneath a caramel tree.

Yang Qing took a deep breath of satisfaction as he admired the mountain that would be the venue for today's entrance examination. The mountain was called the dawning autumn mountain. He felt it was rather fitting to choose a place that shared a name with the cultivation art he would use for the test.

The region was mildly low and it was called the dawning mountain because of the orange-red leaves that filled the mountain. It had a forest that had maple trees, cedar trees, and the cinnamon tree as the prevalent tree species, though it had a lot of herb growth due to those trees and the environment of the place, in addition, there was a winding river that covered the whole mountain.

The spiritual qi in the area was mild and balanced with all the elements and was suitable to all cultivators from the core formation realm and below and it had a few unique features that would come in handy for the examination one of which was the dreamscape waterfall. All who walked through it

would have their inner ambitions brought to the surface. It was one of the many means of the Order in sifting out those with questionable motives.

"I wonder how many exceptional talents will show up," Yang Qing eagerly thought, however, a worried look soon appeared on his face.

"Zou Yi, Zou Liqin, I hope the both of you can pass this hurdle," Yang Qing worriedly thought.

The two siblings had a low cultivation base at the bronze stage of the bronze refining stage. While the test was balanced out with advantages to give those with low cultivation bases a chance, if they did not have the talent to take advantage, they would not be able to make it through.

Yang Qing admired their ability to adapt and the tenacity they had developed in their years in Purple City, however, the examination today didn't have areas that tested the qualities that they had honed in Purple City. For them to make it, they would have to use their heads and have the will to keep going but they also had to have the talent to work from, without it their chances of getting into the Order will be low, and if that happened Yang Qing could only help them gain jobs in the various organizations around the Order or put their names forward for the intelligence programme and see if the Shadow Hawks could accept, however, that was essentially throwing them into the deep end, a much dark deeper water than the pond they called Purple City.

Their life expectancy would be dangerously low if they went that route, which Yang Qing was rather hesitant to do.

"We will cross that bridge when we get there," muttered Yang Qing as he poured himself the wine Yi Jie left him before he left to break through.

"What are you mumbling to yourself about?"

"Don't you three have cases today?" Yang Qing lazily asked without turning back as he took out three more urns.

At his back was Kang Huilang, Xia Boqin and Dai Chen.

Kang Huilang was dressed in regular-looking yellow robes that made it seem he was going to do some farming instead of working. Xia Boqin as always looked like a noble with deep blue robes.

Yang Qing couldn't help but click in envious disgust when he saw him. Dai Chen had on the same robes as Yang Qing. The dark gold robes and numeral I at the back signifying he was a judge of the outer palace court.

"I don't have any cases for the time being, I already filed for leave in preparation to break through to the palace realm. I will be leaving for the tribulation mountain in three days," answered Kang Huilang as he made his way over, grabbing a few sliced mangoes as he sat down.

"You managed to fuse them?" asked Yang Qing in mild surprise

"Mmh, the thing we worked on yesterday even gave me the inspiration to add one more intent into the mix," Kang Huilang smugly said.

'Combat maniac,' spitefully muttered Yang Qing under his breath.

"What about you two?" asked Yang Qing trying to take the light out of the smug-looking Kang Huilang.

"I'll also be heading for the mountain," Xia Boqin answered as he smoothly sat down and took his cup of the poured wine.

"I filed to be the assistant examiner when I heard it was you supervising this entrance examination," answered Dai Chen as he greedily gulped the wine Yang Qing had poured for him and shamelessly poured another for himself only this time, instead of using the urn, he poured it to a big bowl.

"Well, it's better than watching over it myself," said Yang Qing as his gaze focused on the bottom of the mountain.

Chapter 304 [Bonus] Guidelines Of The Test

Droves of people started swarming in, dressed in different robes and of different ages. Some had new robes, while others had robes that looked like they were hanging on by a thread. There were those as young as five years, while there were those as old as seventy.

Age, size, gender, and looks did not matter, they all had the same nervous and excited expression on their faces as they curiously looked around.

Yang Qing managed to spot Zou Yi and Zou Liqin in the midst of that crowd. Zou Liqin looked to be a nervous wreck as her eyes darted around while standing close to Zou Yi whose eyes were curiously staring around with a competitive spirit oozing from him.

"What do you guys think?" asked Yang Qing as he stood up prepared to head below.

"There are some unique talents."

"I hope there will be unexpected surprises from the lot."

"I'm curious how many will be able to make it the first time."

"Huilang why do you have that look?"

"Did you two do anything?"

"The Vice Chancellor approved of everything within the test."

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Yang Qing flashed and disappeared from the peak of the Dawning autumn mountain and reappeared at the base of it.

The crowd that was busy murmuring to each other, all went silent the moment they saw Yang Qing suddenly appear.

Yang Qing remained silent as he waited for the last of the entrants to gather. The number was quite large since it was at five thousand. However, half of that number was the accompanying family members or guardians who had brought the applicants over.

The Order only accepted entrants from unranked organizations or those in the rank five. For the latter, the whole organization would have to come under the Order or the applicant, if successful would have to cut ties with them. This was to avoid complications that may arise; one of which was the danger to that organization were they discovered to have familial or any other deep ties with someone from the Order.

The other was to avoid disputes that may arise if that organization grew despotic from knowing they had someone from the Order backing them up.

Every applicant was allowed to bring a maximum of four family members or guardians.

Some came with their clan heads or close familial members, others were part of some unranked sect, others had no families while there were those termed as 'special applicants'. These were applicants who belonged to high-ranking organizations, however, they cut ties with them before joining the Order. Hao Da, Yang Qing's problematic friend from his Institute days, was one such example. He was part of the Hao family which is a rank 3 clan, however, he cut ties with them the moment his mother passed and applied to join the Order. The Zou siblings fell into this category too and they were not the only ones. Yang Qing could identify this group based on their fluctuations. They were a lot more stable than the rest, showing their prior background.

And lastly, there were the 'Legacies'. These were the children of members working for the Order. With the Order's attitude toward ensuring fairness to all, even the children of Order employees had to go through the normal route to attain the qualifications to work for the Order. Simply being the child of an employee didn't automatically qualify them to be an employee of the Order. They had to earn that spot.

Even if it was done with fairness in mind, they already had an advantage over the rest, which was their parents or relatives. While the Order strictly enforces the rule that they must go through the same process as others to gain entry into the Order as a worker, their starting point is different from the rest.

The training and the exposure they get are the same as the disciples from Holy Lands. Them clearing the entrance examination is always all but guaranteed for those who apply.

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Yang Qing on seeing everyone had arrived, cleared his throat to show he wanted to speak.

"I want to welcome you all for this auspicious day and important event for both the Order and yourselves.

My name is Yang Qing and I will be the Chief examiner for this examination. Other than me the other examiner is the Dawning autumn mountain.."

Yang Qing pointed to the mountain behind him as he said this with an austere expression.

"The mountain behind you will test whether you have what it takes to be accepted by the Order.

I don't know why each of you decided to apply but I can promise you, regardless of the reason, your life will change from this moment forth, should you reach the top.."

Yang Qing's statement ignited the battle intents of the applicants who moments ago were bundles of nerves.

"The Order's examination is a bit different than what is considered the norm, however there are aspects of it that do not deviate from the normal..."

Everyone perked up their ears when the details involving the test were being given. None was an exception, from the legacies to the vagrants, even the guardians and family members of the applicants paid careful attention to Yang Qing's words.

"The Order considers a lot of different aspects in those it accepts, so you don't necessarily have to be great at combat to be considered as valuable to the Order. Some of you may have skills in alchemy,

herbology, medicine, formation, spirit beast zoology, geomancy, blacksmithing, craftsmanship, combat etc; whatever your skills, the mountain behind me will give you an opportunity to draw out those skills.

So hold nothing back, you may fail the test but your performance may give reason for consideration despite the overall result, to wit, the exam has one rule and one rule only and that is to make it to the caramel tree at the top.

Those who do, gain an automatic entry into the Order, and those who don't, some may get special consideration depending on their performance, and for others, sadly we will have to part ways."

Chapter 305 Different Participants

The atmosphere turned sombre at Yang Qing's statement. It was a common occurrence around moments like this. Everyone conveniently imagines themselves getting through but none ever thinks about the other side of it, which was a failure despite the high failure rate with tests like these ones.

"I will reiterate again; this test has one rule and one rule only which is to make it to the top. As long as you reach my table at the top of the mountain you will have considered to have passed the exam.

And now let me give you kind words of advice; be very attentive to everything around you, be adaptable, do not let your guard down, and do your best, should you make it, this will be a lifetime opportunity to change the trajectories of your lives, so make sure you leave no regrets behind..." said Yang Qing as he made eye contact with every single one of the participants.

"Oh, I almost forgot, within the mountain, there will be special locations spread about. If I were you, I would make it a priority to make it to those areas.

Those areas could be considered to be safe zones. Within 50 meters of those areas, nothing can attack you, in addition, there will be other special features that will be even more crucial to you more than the safety those areas provide.

In there, you will find certain things I've left for you all to make use of. It will help increase your odds of survival as you scale up the mountain.

The areas are randomly spread about around the mountain, so be keen and it looks like this," said Yang Qing as he used his qi to create a vivid image of a maple tree that had the symbol of a bullfrog on its trunk.

The participants narrowed their gazes to commit every single part of the tree to memory, even its grains.

"Does anyone have any questions up to this point?" Yang Qing gently asked.

The crowd went silent for a few seconds before one of them hesitantly raised his hand.

The participant who fearfully stepped forward to ask the question was a kid with a slender build which didn't seem it was out of choice either. He was thin to the point one would think the wind blowing in the place would easily carry him away. He had deep sunken eyes, grey flakey hair, bronze skin, and dark eyes. He was one of the tallest people around but because of his clearly malnourished look it, he was slouched over like a strung bow.

In terms of age, he looked to be sixteen but Yang Qing could tell the kid was 13 years old.

His robes though clean were worn out and filled with patches all over. Some of the well-off participants looked at him with mockery in their eyes. As for his cultivation, he was only in the iron stage of the body refining realm.

"What's your name?" asked Yang Qing as he offered a genial smile to try and ease the grey-haired participant.

"My name is Lai Rou," answered the youth, his voice shaking as he answered.

"What is it you wanted to ask? I will answer any questions you have, no matter how small or silly you may think it is, I don't mind. So ask away," said Yang Qing.

Lai Rou went silent for a second trying to collect his thoughts along with his courage together.

"Will we all be taking the test together?" he quickly asked.

"What I mean is, we...not all of us are in the same realm, if we all got in at the same time then..."

His eyes quickly darted around to some of the participants with cultivation bases in the qi refinement and above. His implications were clear on what his real worry was about which invited no small number of ridiculing eyes from some of those participants while others were indifferent to it.

"Yes Lai Rou, every participant here regardless of their age or cultivation base will be taking the same test at the same time..."

Lai Rou's expression turned downcast once he heard that. He wasn't the only one, as those with weaker cultivation bases all shared the same looks. Even Zou Yi and Zou Liqin had troubled looks at Yang Qing's statement.

"The world is an unfair place, and I don't need to tell you that. Some of you have personally experienced that fact. That fact will not change here and it will not change even after you join the Order. You will be thrown into unfamiliar situations that may or may not be advantageous to you.

Should that happen, what would you do? Will you abandon your duties because the circumstances were unfair, or will you do what some of you have learned to do in unforgiving and unfair circumstances, which is to use what you have to survive and that is what will be expected of you, each one of you..." Yang Qing paused a bit as he let that reality sink into the participants.

"That being said, you will be given a fighting chance, like I said those special zones have certain things to them, and safety is the least of those things, in addition, I will also be handing out a cultivation art to you all, which depending on how much understanding you gain from it, may very well carry you to the top of this mountain despite the realm you will be at.

While the world is unfair, in some regard, nature is fair to all, so do keep that in mind as you scale the mountain.

Does anyone have any other questions?" asked Yang Qing.

With Lai Rou taking the plunge, two more participants found the guts to raise their hands. One was from the special group and the other was one of the unique participants present. Both were at the middle stages of qi refinement. The only difference was their gender and age.

The cultivator from the special group was a young lady who looked to be 11 years old, and the other cultivator was an old man in his late sixties. He wore a farmer's light green robes, a straw hat, and had a smoothed wooden stick for support.

He drew a lot of eyes in because of his age. He was the oldest participant present.

Chapter 306 Test Begins!!

The Order didn't place a lot of limits on those who could apply for their examination. When it came to age as long as you had 20 years before you were at death's door you could try out for their tests. Even though the younger you were, the better your odds of breaking through due to the strong vitality associated with a young age, that only applied to the early stages of cultivation, and that aspect could be remedied with some treasures.

There were a lot of talents that go unburied because they lacked the necessary resources to unearth that talent. It was why the Order never cared much for age and were loose in their entry requirements to the point that they would even allow someone without a cultivation base to take their examination.

There were those geniuses you could tell at a glance they were geniuses because visibly there were factors that showed their statuses as one, but then there were those whose radiance was mired by something and others which hadn't yet been revealed.

For example, the old man. He may end up being a hidden talent that had wasted away his years in faulty cultivation arts or he may end up being mediocre. The Order didn't lose anything in finding out. If he ended up being a genius who had the horrible luck of having a difficult starting, they would be more than willing to spend whatever resources they had to raise him to his potential.

However, it was a gamble in the end. Sometimes it paid off, other times it doesn't. During Yang Qing's entrance, he participated with a few of them. None of them passed sadly.

Yang Qing decided to point to the elderly man first in respect of seniority.

"My name is Bu Fui, esteemed master. If you don't mind me asking, I have two questions about the cultivation art?" asked the elderly man.

He had a simple but firm accent to him despite his age.

"Yes.." asked Yang Qing as he motioned for him to go on.

"Can we continue using it after the test even if we fail to get in, and the other question is if we will be receiving guidance on it, and if so, how long will the guidance be and will it be considered part of the test too?" asked Bu Fui.

"To answer your first question, you are free to use the art even if you fail the entrance examination, and you can freely pass it down to whoever you want to, however, be mindful of who you pass it to. If the person you give it to ends up causing a heinous crime with that art and I hear about it, I will personally find you.

The art is my personal property and you can consider it a gift from me to all of you for taking this brave step..." said Yang Qing.

All the participants' eyes lit up, even the legacies, none was left unaffected by the prospect of getting a cultivation art for free.

"As for the next question, no, no one will be guiding you, and there is no specific time set aside for you to learn it.

How long you decide to take on the art will be up to you, though in some regard, that could be a test of sorts.

Aren't you all curious if you have the makings to be considered a genius by the Order's standards? This is your opportunity. You have everything you need to find the other to that question," said Yang Qing with a smile thoroughly igniting the fighting will of the participants, especially the young ones.

"It's your turn young miss, what did you want to ask?"

The elderly man Bu Fui stepped back as he bowed in gratitude leaving the floor to the 11-year-old with yellow hair tied into a ponytail. She had a prideful look to her, which was in stark contrast to what looked like her parents who were sweating buckets, unlike their daughter. The father was rotund and had a merchant's air about him, however, had no cultivation base while the mother was slender and was clearly the reason for the beauty of the lady. Her cultivation base was only in the late stages of qi refinement realm.

The young lady on seeing Yang Qing point to her, cusped her fists and elegantly walked forward with poise in her steps.

"Thank you for the opportunity, my name is Yin Rong. Are participants attacking each other allowed?" she asked.

"Our numbers may be more than the special zones available, after all," she added as she sent a dangerous glare to some of the cultivators around, one of which was Lai Rou.

"It's all up to you. Like I said be attentive," Yang Qing said with a mysterious smile about him.

The young lady seemed displeased with his ambiguous answer but did well to conceal it with a polite smile.

Yang Qing took a few more questions after that and then gave a few minutes to the guardians and family members of the participants to say their short goodbyes before the start of the rest. Once they had finished, they were transported to a different viewing area where they could see the progress of those they had brought.

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"This is the cultivation art I'll be providing. It's called the 108 steps of the autumn leaves. Feel free to use it if you want to. Using it or not will not affect your standing.

You also need to place this somewhere on your robes," Yang Qing said as he passed booklets containing the improvised 108 steps of the autumn leaves cultivation art. In addition to the booklet, he also gave out orange maple leaves.

The participants eagerly took the booklet as they curiously examined the leaf.

"The leaf is a protection tool that will only react if you're on the brink of death. It will restore your injury and transport you out of the mountain, at which you will be considered to have been eliminated.

Now with nothing else left to add on, let the Order entrance test BEGIN!!" said Yang Qing as he waved his sleeves instantly transporting the participants before a waterfall.

"Your test begins now."

Chapter 307 Zou Yi's Plans

Yang Qing immediately flashed to the mountain's peak after making the announcement.

"I hope there will be interesting surprises," said Dai Chen whilst pouring himself another cup.

The other judges all chimed in their thoughts as they stared at the participants who had already eagerly started the test.

Their guardians were all nervously monitoring them, hoping for the best. To some of them, this was the chance to leap over the dragon gate and transform from carp to dragons.

There was a saying, if an immortal ascended, even his cows, chickens, and dogs would get elevated with them. The same thing applied to the family and guardians of the participants.

Should the participants pass, it would be a grand opportunity not only for them but even for their family or guardians too, who would receive the Order's favor because of their relation to the successful participant.

They would get access to resources they would have never dreamed of, and having the halo of the Order above them wasn't bad either. Every now and then, there would be certain groups that would use the Order as a safe haven to escape something that was beyond them in the continent.

This happened more often than not. For those who failed, what waited for them at the end wasn't just rejection but certain doom from whatever they were running from. One could say the test was even a life-and-death battle for some.

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Despite being given the go-ahead to begin the test, the participants all had different reactions to the announcement. A small group plunged into the waterfall without a second thought.

This group was made of the smallest number. It was made up of four people. Two of them were legacy, while one was another unique component. It was a six-year-old male kid who still had some baby fat on his cheeks. He was the youngest participant and had reached the bronze body of the refining stage despite his young age. As for the last member, it was Lai Rou, the thin cultivator who was the first to ask the question, when Yang Qing opened the floor to questions.

As for the rest, it was basically two groups. One group was calmly observing the first group to see if there was any trap in the waterfall, while the other group was perusing the booklet containing the 108 steps of the autumn leaves.

Each one of them had shining eyes as they went through the booklet. Two of the remaining legacies were in this group.

To avoid overwhelming their participants, the Order had kept a cap on how many legacies could be fielded in every test. The cap was six per test.

As for the test, the Order conducted an entrance examination once every two weeks. If it wasn't for the astronomical costs associated with it, the number of tests would have been increased to once a day if it was tenable in terms of resources expended or guarantee of quality.

However, due to the constraining factors, it was restricted to two tests a month, and the chief examiner would be different every time along with the type of test, which kept things relatively fair and unpredictable to all.

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Zou Yi and Zou Liqin were part of the second group, that decided to go through the cultivation booklet before they began the test.

"What do you think?" eagerly asked Zou Yi.

Ever since they were kids he knew his sister had a higher aptitude than him when it came to cultivation, specifically formation arrays. She was more like their father in this regard. Sadly, with how things eventually evolved, she didn't have the opportunity to realize that potential. Cultivation was a costly endeavor, even in the early stages, were it not so, they would not have remained stuck in the bronze stage of the body refining realm for the few years they were at Purple City. They were even at risk of hidden injuries because they couldn't afford the diet requirements of their cultivation base.

But an opportunity had finally arrived. Zou Yi couldn't hide his excitement which wasn't for him but to see the heights his sister could reach.

While he didn't look down on his own potential, he knew his sister's odds were higher than his. He was already prepared for the potential that he might not make it through and if he didn't, he would be okay with it. He could work at the restaurant with the Wang couple. But he had resolved himself to do everything in his power to ensure his sister made it through, it was the least he could do as her brother.

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"It's pretty profound, I can't believe big brother Yang Qing decided to share it with us. Even at the clan, it is rare to see something like this being handed out. Only the prized clan members, like father, would..." her voice trailed out as a melancholic look appeared on her face.

"This is a chance to make Mom and Dad proud, even Grandpa. Maybe when we are done with the exam, we can try and send him the good news," Zou Yi gently said as he tried to raise his sister's spirits.

"Mmh," Zou Liqin nodded as she clenched her fists and refocused back on the booklet.

"The 108 steps autumn cultivation art addresses everything at every stage, it even has different potion baths and recipes we need for each stage in the body refining realm.

I can't believe how expansive it is, especially the recipes of the silver body stage and the varied ways of achieving," Zou Liqin said with clear excitement in her tone.

"It even has accompanying techniques to help with the breakthroughs and understanding of the art. What do you think could be its grade, Zou Yi?" Zo Yi eagerly asked with her eyes and palms glued to the booklet the more she read it.

"I don't know, but considering how expansive it is, it should not be less than the blue grade," Zou Yi answered.

"Liqin, based on Brother Yang Qing's words, the special zones may very well have the resources and equipment to make the baths and the potion.

Since he said the test is wholesome and will allow the participants to display their different strengths across different subjects, I think alchemy is one of them. All these provided recipes prove that fact.." added Zou Yi as he sunk into further contemplation.

"I think we need to team up with other people," firmly said Zou Yi after a brief pause.

"But isn't that dangerous, what if..." her eyes darted to the yellow-haired lady who had asked Yang Qing whether attacking other participants is allowed.

Her insinuation was clear. She was worried they may get attacked or worse get used as fodder during the test.

Chapter 308 Sudden Announcement

They were already one of the weakest in the area. The only people weaker than them were three people. One of them was Lai Rou who was in the iron body stage, the other was a wild looking boy who was almost the same age as them.

He was nine years old and had worn different animal skins as clothing, covered his face with dung leaving his eyes, nose and mouth as the only visible parts of his face. He had deep laceration marks all over his arms, legs, part of his torso and face. They looked like claw marks of different beasts.

As for the last person, it was a young lady about 13 years old. She looked dazed and confused. She had not made a single movement the whole time. She stood silently staring at the waterfall in a zoned-out expression. She had on a worn-out cream-colored robe and a scarf that looked too small for her, that had blue colored stars on it. She was the oddest of the bunch.

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"I know..." Zou Yi said as he sighed.

"But we don't have a choice in this matter. If we want to make it to the top, we will need help. We already have one of the weakest cultivation bases. If we went up the mountain as is, I doubt we would make it far.

None of us is that skilled in alchemy either or herbology for that matter. If we want to make the best use of the recipes we have, then we need someone who at least knows a little bit about these things.

While the booklet has the name of the herbs we need, even their pictures. That's about it, an image and a name.

How many herbs resemble each other?

This may be the perfect way to lay a trap. Give someone enough information to reel them in and lower their guards and then entrap them," added Zou Yi which created a solemn look on Zou Liqin.

"Having little knowledge is as dangerous as lacking knowledge, in fact in some regard, I think it's even more dangerous. We need help. The mountain is likely to be filled with all sorts of things.

We know to deal with people, but whatever lies there maybe something else," Zou Yi said as he pointed past the waterfall.

"Who do we go with?" asked Zou Liqin.

"Who would you choose?" Zou Yi asked back.

Now that they were at this point, he would do everything he could to promote Zou Liqin's sense of independence. If they got in the Order, they may get sent to different departments.

Surviving in Purple City, they became codependent on each other, but from this moment forth it may prove to be a handicap in certain areas, especially their growth, and finding their own path.

The few days he had at the Order before the test began made him reconsider a lot of things on their future, and their experience.

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"It seems Zou Yi's soul has gotten much calmer and purer over the past few days," said Yang Qing with white colored pupils appearing in his eyes.

"Their prior experience may prove to be a blessing for them," said Xia Boqin.

They were all closely monitoring the actions of each and every participant. For those who may fail to reach their table, their actions may be able to qualify them in.

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Zou liqin stayed silent for a brief moment as she bit her nails, cautiously sizing the people around her.

"I would go for those at the same level or stronger than us, however when it comes to those stronger than I was, I think its safer to not choose anyone above the early stages of the qi refinement realm.

We may end up as subordinates instead of partners in such a dynamic, which may put us in more dire situations," answered Zou Liqin after she had collected her thoughts together.

"I agree with your assessment completely..."

Zou Liqin lit up with pride when she heard this.

"But I think there area few exceptions we can make with those in the middle grade of qi refinement," Zou Yi added as his gaze secretly swept over a few people, one of them being the sixty year old man from before in the farmer robe and hat. He too was one of those who decided to peruse the cultivation booklet first.

"I think some are worth a try, for example the elderly man Bu Fui, or those two twins. One of them seems like the honest sort. If Lai Rou was here, I would have preferred to join up with him too even if he is weaker than us," said Zou Yi.

The two twins he mentioned were 14-year-old twins who looked dissimilar in everything but their face. They were brothers. One had short black hair, brown robes and a masculine build, while the other had a slender build, scholarly white robes and long hair tied in a bun. The masculine one had a simplistic air to him, even his grin screamed innocence and purity. It was why Zou Yi considered forming an alliance.

"I think we should make a move," said Zou Yi as he saw other participants come to the same conclusion as him.

Lots of participants started grouping up, he even saw a few of them come over to their side. While they were one of the weakest groups, their mannerisms as Zou clan scions had not left them, coupled with their new orange robes, made certain parties more open to recruiting them despite their bronze body refining realm.

Zou Yi politely declined most of those who came forward. While he didn't how to survive in a mountain, he did know how to survive in a city filled with all kinds of people. Surviving in the bottom rungs of Purple City and his interactions with the underworld of the city made him acutely aware of certain nefarious intentions, which he detected in most of the participants who came over.

While he thought it would be risky making the trip alone, he would rather do it with Zou Liqin than team up with people who would be all too quick to turn on them, among other things.

Just as he was about to approach the old man Bu Fui, an announcement suddenly echoed all over the mountain from Yang Qing.

"I forgot to mention this but the first three to make it up the mountain will be receiving merit points. For those with no idea, with merit points you can buy almost anything from the Order. It's more valuable than spirit stones.

In addition, anything you find in the mountain is yours to keep whether you qualify to join the Order or not.

All the best..."

Chapter 309 Forming A Team

Yang Qing's announcement seemed to have lit up a fuse, as the participants who were comfortable taking their time immediately sprung into action.

They plunged into the waterfall by the dozens, with the remaining legacies being the first of the bunch.

Zou Yi's target the elderly man Bu Fui disappeared in the midst of that chaos which made Zou Yi halt his steps as he moved back to where his sister was.

"What do we do? Do we rush in just the two of us?"

"No, I guess improvising is the only thing we can do," Zou Yi said as he made his way to the 9-year-old young boy with lacerations over his body and garbed in animal hides.

He immediately became weary when Zou Yi made his way as he grabbed the short axe on his left waist. He also had a bow and arrows that were crudely made. The axe was rusty and had blood-dried marks on it and looked to be held together by a vine.

"What do you two want? I may be at the iron stage, but if you think you can push me around be prepared, you will both pay a price for it," said the 9-year-old boy as murderous intent flashed in his eyes.

"We did not come with evil intentions, we hope to form an alliance with you," Zou Yi said as he paused a safe distance away from the 9-year-old boy.

He tried to offer a genial smile but that only made the boy more wary of him.

"I don't want to," the 9-year-old crudely replied as he tightened his grip on his axe in preparation for an attack.

Zou Yi stared at the high-strung 9-year-old for a few seconds before he removed the smile on his face with a slightly serious expression. The nine-year-old tightly clenched his axe that the whites of his knuckles started showing.

"You must have your reason for being here, and so do we.." Zou Yi gently said as he removed his robes from his shoulders to his torso.

The nine-year-old who was just about ready to attack, halted his steps with a surprised look.

What he saw was a slender frame just like his except it didn't have as much muscle as his, however, what stood out to him were the numerous scars that filled that body. Some even seemed to have grown on top of each other.

The nine-year-old boy couldn't help but trace his own injuries.

"We both have something we are chasing towards at the top of that mountain. I'm not asking we be friends or sworn brothers, what I'm asking for is a partnership.

Think of it as a trade. I think you're already aware the mountain may not be as simple as it seems, which is why you haven't stepped in yet.

Are you confident of climbing it alone?" asked Zou Yi.

The nine-year-old boy was silent; however, he wasn't on guard as before as he stared deeply at the injuries on Zou Yi.

Zou Liqin at the side had a saddened look as she saw Zou Yi's torso. When they were with Yang Qing, he offered to heal them completely. Zou Liqin took him up on the offer, Zou Yi did too but he wanted the scars on his body to remain as a reminder lest he get arrogant in the future.

"We all can help each other. My sister and I are skilled with formation arrays, and while I may not be an exceptional fighter, my reaction isn't bad. Having an extra pair of hands and eyes wouldn't hurt.

What say you, friend, do you want to form a partnership with me and my sister?" Zou Yi asked extending the olive branch.

The nine-year-old remained silent with his gaze never leaving the two and his hand still holding to the axe.

"I will not hesitate to leave you behind in case a dangerous situation appears that I deem impossible to overcome. I will not warn you, help you or stay with you should that moment arrive," the nine-year-old boy finally said.

"But I will not stab you in the back to ensure my survival," he added after a couple of seconds when he felt his statement sounded wrong.

Zou Yi finally smiled when he heard his response. This was basically an agreement from the nine-year-old youth.

"As I said, it's a partnership, just that. It's a pleasure to be working with you..."

"My name is He Shan," answered the nine-year-old boy.

"I'm Zou Yi and this is my sister Zou Liqin," Zou Yi said as he pointed to his sister.

"Nice to meet you," said Zou Liqin with a polite smile.

He Shan flinched a little at her smile and clenched his axe in a fluster before he regained his calmness and awkwardly nodded back.

The siblings lightly laughed which helped defuse the earlier tension.

"So what are your skills, we will need to share a bit if we are to make an effective partnership. As I said earlier, we have skilled in formation arrays. We are a bit all-rounded when it comes to it, that's not to say we are geniuses or anything, we just know bits here and there on a wide range," said Zou Yi which drew an incredulous look from He Shan.

How could the nine-year-old know they were taught by one of the best talents of the Zou Clan, a rank 2 clan famed for their reputation in formation arrays, and their father was one of the youngest blue grade array masters of the clan?

He had hammered the basics into them since they were young. While they he died before he completely laid the foundation in the subject, they were confident they knew enough to compete with the other participants since they had the personal tutelage of a gifted blue-grade formation master.

"My skills lie in hunting and surviving as a hunter," said He Shan.

Both Zou siblings had dumbfounded expressions when they heard He Shan's reply.

They could already tell he was a hunter, but couldn't He Shan expound on it a little bit more?

"I'm skilled in long-range and close-quarter combat. Have good control over my senses such as sight, smell, and hearing. I know a bit about herbs, well which are edible and which you shouldn't touch, though that's not to say I know their names.

And I can roughly gauge a beast's attack patterns and preferences after the first couple of clashes. Grandpa said I'm a natural at it," He Shan said with pride, showing a rare smile ever since their interaction, before he hurriedly closed his mouth and resumed his wary appearance once he remembered which setting, he was in.

"That's pretty useful He Shan," said Zou Yi in amazement. He had no doubt there were likely to be spirit beasts in the mountain, and He Shan's skills would definitely come in handy.

"Should we set off?" Zou Yi suggested.

Both Zou Liqin and He Shan nodded in agreement and they soon made their way to the waterfall. However, just as they were about to go through it, Zou Liqin paused as her eyes fell in a particular direction.

"Not again," Zou Yi said with a facepalm.

Chapter 310 Lessons From The Past

He Shan puzzledly looked in front of him to see what the hold-up was about. He had conveniently positioned himself a few inches at the back, giving himself ample room to react in case Zou Yi and Zou Liqin tried something. Even if they were now in an alliance, he still didn't trust them one bit.

He saw Zou Liqin look in a particular direction. He recognized that look. It was the same look he had when he was very small and would try to convince his grandfather to spare a certain beast when they were out hunting or when he wanted to bring back a couple of them home as pets, ignoring the fact they would be eaten by the beast if given a chance.

He couldn't help but chuckle when he remembered his naivete from back then before his look turned to one of sadness mixed in with regret.

"Does your sister want to bring her with us?" asked He Shan as his expression turned stoic.

"Liqin, we can't do it. She doesn't have a cultivation base and by the looks of it, it doesn't seem like she even wants to participate in the test. Even with the announcement she still hasn't made a single movement," said Zou Yi.

The moment Zou Liqin stopped, he saw where her gaze had landed, and it was on the weakest participant. The 13-year-old girl without a cultivation base who had been staring at the waterfall with a dazed expression on her face.

Zou Yi even suspected that the Order made a mistake in letting someone like her take the test. She did not seem like she was all there. Back at the Zou clan he had seen some clan members show the same habits as her. Those clan members were ones who got traumatized while undergoing the selection test for the next clan patriarch.

He couldn't help but suspect the same thing may have happened with that 13-year-old girl.

"But brother, it can't hurt to have extra help, besides Grandpa.." Zou Liqin's voice trailed off in a faint quiver as she focused on the dazed girl.

Zou Yi who was prepared to rebut her and forcefully pull her into the waterfall, paused his actions. He silently stared at his sister and the girl and moments later made a sigh of exasperation as he said,

"Fine, do what you want, but if she doesn't want to move, we can't force her or wait for her and if she puts us at any risk, we will abandon her. If you're okay with that, then you can ask her to join us, but if

you're not, I'm afraid we will have to leave her Liqin, we can't afford to be willful," Zou Yi said in an austere tone and expression.

"Fine, I agree," Zou Liqin begrudgingly agreed as she hurriedly made her way over to the dazed 13-year-old girl.

"Are you two crazy?!" He Shan hurriedly yelled with spittle flying everywhere. Some of it even fell on Zou Yi who wasn't far away from him.

"She doesn't have any cultivation, and we are about to step into an unknown situation, and you two want to add more risk to the already unfavorable circumstances?"

We are already the weakest, and you want to add another burden to the mix when we can barely guarantee our safety in there, even with all of us cooperating.

All this for what? Some misguided kindness? What if we all get eliminated because of her? Have you all thought through the consequences of your actions?

Misplaced kindness is no less dangerous than drinking poison hoping it will stave off your hunger. If you two want to take such a risk, do it, I'm better off alone," He Shan vehemently said as he prepared to set off alone.

"While bringing her along comes with its risk, I can tell you leaving now and scaling the mountain alone will almost guarantee in your elimination, as compared to doing it with us, even with a 'burden' coming along with us," Zou Yi coldly said.

"Though you could scale up the mountain if you had a monstrous talent, that would guarantee your success of it, but the fact that you agreed to form a partnership with us or remained behind instead of charging in immediately at the start of the test was announced, means you do not believe your individual talent is enough to scale the mountain alone.

You need us, the same way we need you, and there is no one else around who we would both be comfortable enough to form a partnership with," added Zou Yi.

His words seemed to have had an effect since He Shan had paused his footsteps as he glared back at him.

"He Shan.." Zou Yi's gaze turned to one of sorrow as he mentioned He Shan's name.

"My father, mine, and Zou Yi's was hailed as a genius, a once-in-a-thousand-years genius. He was given that title in a place that had no shortage of geniuses. Everyone from the elderly to the young believed in that..."

Zou Yi smiled wryly when he reached this point as his gaze turned distant.

He Shan had a puzzled expression as he wondered what all this had to do with the matter at hand.

'Do we have time for this? Forget it, Grandpa said if one has a story the least one can do is listen in silence. I should think of it as hunting and learning more about the habits of my prey' thought He Shan.

"However, that one in a thousand genius, lost to someone no one had any expectations of, and the loss wasn't small either.

He Shan, our father lost and died, and the person he competed against was a nobody who shocked the whole clan and ended up gaining something coveted beyond measure.

I learned something from that tragic reality, things are never as one expects, life has a way of surprising you and it is never set in stone. To us, that girl may very well be a dead weight but who knows, she may surprise us.

In your hunting, haven't you ever been surprised by a beast that acted outside your expectations?" asked Zou Yi.