

Daily life 311

Chapter 311 Going Through The Waterfall

He Shan's gaze inadvertently fell on one particular scar on his left arm when Zou Yi asked that question.

"Fine, but what if she doesn't end up being surprising and is in fact what we both believe her to be?" asked He Shan as he took a sit while facing the waterfall with his back facing Zou Yi.

"Then we abandon her," Zou Yi firmly said as he took a sit beside him. He was still mindful enough to keep a distance from He Shan.

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"Hi, I'm Zou Liqin, do you maybe want to partner up with us for the test? I think it would be good if those of us with the cultivation base would look out for each other," Zou Liqin softly said as she tried to rouse the 13-year-old girl from her dazed state with a soft tone.

"Hi.."

Zou Liqin called her once more when she didn't get a response even after a minute or two had passed. She awkwardly looked behind her only to see her brother urging her to hurry, while He Shan didn't hide his displeasure as he glared at her with an impatient expression.

Zou Liqin sighed as she prepared to try and reach out to the girl once more. If she didn't reply, she would take it as a decline of her request and just leave.

"You're kind."

The young girl suddenly spoke just as Zou Liqin was about to reach out to her again.

Zou Liqin was stunned for a brief second before she hurriedly said,

"Do you want to team up with us?" Zou Liqin asked with a polite smile as she pointed to her brother and He Shan, whose gazes were locked on the 13-year-old girl.

"This waterfall is mesmerizing. I don't know when was the last time I felt this peaceful," said the young girl as she stared at the waterfall with a serene look on her face.

"She's pretty,"

"Mmh, but we will still abandon her if the situation asks for it,"

"Goes without saying, but still..."

"She looks like a moon fox,"

Zou Yi and He Shan had dazed looks as they saw her serene appearance that seemed to meld with the charm of the waterfall.

Zou Yi could have sworn he saw the blue stars on her scarf glimmer.

"Do you want to join us?" Zou Liqin softly asked. Doubt flashed in her eyes as she asked the question again.

"My physical body isn't the strongest, I may drag you all," said the young girl as she tore her eyes away from the waterfall and settled them on Zou Liqin who immediately froze when her gaze fell on her.

She felt like all her internal thoughts were laid bare the moment that gaze fell on her.

'She felt almost like brother Yang Qing' she thought as she cleared her head.

Her brother and He Shan had expressed their clear impatience, thus she couldn't afford to drag things out.

"We are not that strong either, so I think there's safety in numbers and we can all use what we are strong in to make up for each other's deficiencies to try and survive through the test.

You may not have physical strength, but you may have something else you are good at, right?" Zou Liqin hopefully asked.

"I don't know if it's a talent or anything, but I've always been able to feel things, most of the time it isn't good things, this is the first time I've felt something good like this waterfall.

It has a peacefulness to it, that I've never felt before," the 13-year-old girl said as her eyes went back to the waterfall again.

Just as Zou Liqin was about to get worried another dazed episode was about to ensue, the 13-year-old girl added,

"If you don't think me a burden or beneath you, I would be glad to join you," she said with a gentle smile.

"I'm Yu Mei,"

"I'm Zou Liqin," answered Zou Liqin with a smile on her face.

"Can we leave now?" impatiently asked He Shan.

"That's He Shan and next to him is my brother Zou Yi," introduced Zou Liqin as they made their way to the duo

"Nice to meet you," said Yu Mei as she curtsied.

He Shan thought nothing of it as he harrumphed in impatience giving a casual wave, however, Zou Yi and Zou Liqin exchanged a brief before the former replied back with a polite greeting of his own.

"Should we get going?" asked Zou Yi to the three new party members, who all nodded back in agreement.

"Be sincere," Yu Mei suddenly said.

The trio all had confused looks as they looked at Yu Mei.

He Shan already threw a look Zou Yi's way that seemed to be saying,

'She's crazy, let's leave her before it's too late.'

Zou Yi seemed to be considering the suggestion but held off when he saw his sister's fierce glare.

"Sincere in what, sister Mei?" asked Zou Liqin.

"The waterfall..." Yu Mei pointed towards it.

"If you want to get through to the other side, you need to be sincere. That's the feeling I'm getting from it," she added.

The trio all had incredulous looks as they shifted their gazes to the waterfall. However, they could not detect anything off with it. It seemed like a normal waterfall.

He Shan had a look that showed he did not believe her at all and as for Zou Yi, he seemed to be a bit on the fence about it and had to look to his sister to get her thoughts on the matter, who looked just as equally in doubt.

"Well, there is only one way to find out," said Zou Yi as he took the lead in walking through the waterfall.

Zou Liqin and Yu Mei followed behind, with He Shan taking up the rear as he switched to his bow.

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"This..." Zou Yi was surprised to find out that even though he was in the middle of the waterfall, not a single part of him was drenched.

"It seems He Shan is right," Zou Yi thought as he chuckled to himself.

'Where are they?' Zou Yi thought as he turned to look behind him, only to find a white mist at his back blocking his entire view.

"Liqin, He Shan, Yu Mei?" he called out.

A minute passed by with no response. Zou Yi called out once more but still got no response.

If before it wasn't clear, right now he was all but certain there was definitely something off with the waterfall.

Chapter 312 It's You?

Zou Yi called out a few more times still not willing to accept the present circumstances. When calling out didn't work, he decided to cautiously look around.

He took small measured steps, with his body angled at the best position for retreating, defense, or a counterattack. Whichever proved more suitable at the moment.

However, all that preparation proved to be for naught. There was nothing but chilly white mist around him. With no direction or landmarks to work with, Zou Yi decided to walk forward in a straight line. If he zig-zagged around he may find himself moving in circles without knowing.

Thirty minutes went by and he was still walking with no end in sight, and no change experienced. The same silent white mist kept him company.

Outwardly he seemed calm and composed, but inwardly he was a bundle of nerves in worry for himself and his sister.

'What I'm I supposed to do here? Just walk around? Am I missing something?' wondered Zou Yi.

There was nothing but silence and illusory mist. He couldn't glean any clues on how to proceed forward, so he just kept walking and with every step he took, he drowned in doubt, that grew to worry, that grew to impatience, which then turned into agitation.

At the two-hour mark, whatever sense of calmness he had at the beginning had been eroded away within the cold silence.

"Little Yi.."

As Zou Yi was debating on what to do next, he heard a faint whisper coming from the mist.

"Huh?" Zou Yi frantically looked around him with a guarded expression.

After having nothing but misty silence for company for the past two hours, that slight change triggered his agitation further.

He looked around with widened eyes ready to launch a fist, but the attack he expected to come, didn't.

'I must be losing it,' he inwardly thought as he chuckled bitterly.

'It's just the first part...' he couldn't help but worry. The fact that he knew this was a test, was the tether that helped him maintain whatever rationality he had left after the two hours went by.

He continued walking for another half an hour and assumed the voice he had heard was nothing but his nerves and delusions getting to him. However, the same voice sounded again, and this time it was a bit clearer.

"Little Yi, you have grown."

"Who's there?!" Zou Yi asked in agitation as he rapidly switched his view to his left and right.

Ten minutes went by with no reply. Zou Yi didn't so much as take a single step from where he was as he looked around warily.

At this point with how terrified and on edge he was, he very much preferred an attack than to be tortured endlessly by a voice that appeared and disappeared hours apart.

He wasn't sure how much of it he could take.

"Little Yi, how is your sister doing?"

Zou Yi who was prepared to make a dash for it and see if he could outrun the foggy mist, paused his steps as his pupils trembled. Immediately after, his whole body was shaking.

"Are you all eating well, taking care of yourself, I hope you're not bullying her."

This time the voice was more distinctive. Earlier it was shallow and androgynous, but this time Zou Yi could clearly tell the tone of the voice and even the gender.

"Mom.... is... is...is that you?" Zou Yi weakly asked with eyes welling up with tears. He still couldn't tell the direction of the voice, so he could only slowly look around as he asked this question.

His heart was wildly racing as he got flooded with a mix of emotions. He was afraid, excited, anxious, thrilled, panicked, in doubt, and hopeful.

That voice was something he had wished he could hear over the past three years. He had obsessed over it, dreamt about it, but sadly the voice existed only in his dreams. Every time he woke up, that voice wasn't there. It got too painful that he had to try and erase it in his mind.

It's been a few months since he dreamt of it, but now here it was, and as far as he could tell, he was awake.

Zou Yi pinched his left forearm to confirm he wasn't dreaming. The electric sensation traveling through his arm was the proof he needed to know that this wasn't a dream.

"I didn't think my son would be such a crybaby. What happened to the person who would brag endlessly that he would be the next clan patriarch and overshadow all my achievements?"

Another voice sounded immediately after. This one was masculine.

"Dad...."

The bedlam in Zou Yi's eyes broke when he uttered those words.

"Dad, Mom... Is that you?" asked Zou Yi as he looked around.

The fog that had no change in all the time Zou Yi was walking, finally had a ripple to it.

North of Zou Yi, there was a faint ripple that rapidly grew in intensity that caused the white fog to part in the middle. Zou Yi's gaze narrowed in that direction with anticipation and fear in his eyes.

He saw two silhouettes standing shoulder to shoulder looking in his direction.

Zou Yi squinted his eyes to confirm what he saw was real. Every time he reopened his eyes the silhouettes would get more and more distinct. In no time he could clearly see them, it was no longer a speculation of who the owners of those voices were. It belonged to the two people he had wished every day of his life he could see again, his parents.

His mother was just as he remembered her. She had long curvy black hair, an oval face with polish jade beauty, and amber-colored eyes. She had an unrestrained aura to her. In terms of personality, Zou Yi took after his mother. She would cause no small amount of headache for his father with her fiery personality.

As for his father, he had black hair tied in a Daoist topknot, held together by a hairpin that resembled an inscribing pen used in formation. He had a masculine beauty that didn't lose out to his mother and had a calm and silent aura to him. Zou Liqin took after him in terms of personality, however when it came to their face, they both resembled their father more.

"It's you," Zou Yi said with a quavering voice as his whole body trembled.

Chapter 313 Heart's Desire

Before he could even register, his body had already betrayed him as it dashed in the direction of the two figures. It didn't take long before he was right before them.

Zou Yi hesitantly stretched his hands towards them with anticipation mixed with fear. Even though he was overwhelmed by emotion at the moment, some part of him still knew his parents were dead and had been dead for the past three years.

He was worried his hands would pass through them, then that sinking reality he didn't want to admit, would burst forth and ruin the moment.

But what if, what if the past three years were not real, or by some weird fate the Order had resurrected his parents and this was a surprise unveiling they had arranged for him?

While he had never seen people being brought back to life, he couldn't dismiss its possibility.

If cultivators could survive without their bodies, or be regrown from a drop of blood, his parents could have a chance at survival, right?

In Purple City in preparation for opening his own intelligence agency, he stumbled into a plethora of information floating around, some of which was news regarding cultivators and even mortals who had been brought back to life.

Surely among those stories, some of them might have been true. Part of the reason he and his sister agreed to join the Order was the faintest chance that they could bring back their parents.

With how big and powerful the Order was, surely, they would have a way. At least Zou Yi held out hope they could.

Once that thought took root, it slowly eroded any rationality he had left as he reached out to make his confirmation.

"It's been hard on you, little Yi,"

They were real. His hands didn't go through them as though they were specters or part of the fog. When Zou Yi made contact with their robes, his hands felt it, it was real and not a figment of his imagination.

"Mom. Dad.."

Zou Yi instantly bawled as he threw himself into their embrace. All the torment and heartache he had endured for the past three years exploded within that moment.

His parents stood in silence as they softly patted his back, with only the echoes of Zou Yi's cries echoing around. Even though he had matured over the past few years, he was still a nine-year-old kid who still needed his parents and when he saw them, every guard he had developed over the years broke.

Almost ten minutes went by before Zou Yi finally calmed down.

"What are you both doing here? Are you..." Zou Yi was hesitant to ask.

"We can talk about that later, tell us about you. How have you and your sister been?" asked his mother with a gentle smile as she used the sleeves of her robes to wipe away his tears and snort, which Zou Yi was all too glad to let her do.

"You've not met Liqin yet?" asked Zou Yi in confusion as he looked around.

"You're the first person we have seen, and in our condition, well let's say we are just happy to see our child...So how have you and your sister been?" asked his mother.

Zou Yi realized she was avoiding; however, he didn't insist on it and did as he was asked. He narrated their lives in Purple City, making a point of avoiding the few months that followed after their death. It was a horrendous time after their passing, and Zou Yi did all he could to forget that time.

So, for his tale, he focused on their lives in Purple City, how they survived, how they met the Wang couple, and the friendship they struck with them and their regulars. The tours they gave around the town, the skills they gained, and other exciting details. He avoided the dark part of their lives in the city such as being lackeys to the black viper gang and how much they suffered when they were forced to join.

Zou Yi soon forgot himself in his narration as he animatedly described the two and half years, they spent in Purple City. He got more enthusiastic about it, especially when he saw how attentive and keen his parents seemed to be on hearing the story.

An hour quickly went by before finally he reached the end of his tale which was his interaction with Yang Qing and finally getting a chance to join the Order.

"You did good," said Zou Yi's father with a look of pride on his face.

Zou Yi sniffled, tears threatening to stream down his face, with a warm but abashed smile on his face. Hearing his father's words of reaffirmation, made everything he had endured to ensure his and Zou Liqin's safety to be all worth it.

"I know both you and Liqin will do well in the test, you're our children after all," added his mother as she ruffled his hair.

"Little Yi, I'm sorry that we weren't there for you when you needed us..." said his father with a melancholic tune.

"But you're here now, and Grandpa will join be joining us," Zou Yi suddenly said as he looked up at his parents. However, his gaze froze when he saw their sad smiles. Other than the sad smiles there was something else that shook him, their robes seemed fainter, and it looked to be spreading to their bodies.

"Mom, Dad, what..." Zou Yi worriedly pointed at their misty sleeves as he tried to stitch it back up to their robes. However, his hands passed through.

"Little Yi, I know you're smart to have realized it from the beginning. It is okay. We are glad we got to share this moment with you. It's a shame that we won't get to see you and Liqin grow but I'm glad we got to have this moment with you.

We both love you very much, and you're already my pride," said Zou Yi's father.

"You're not alive, are you?" Zou Yi asked with a sad smile.

"No, little Yi," his mother answered.

"I should have known," said Zou Yi as he stared longingly at his parents trying to commit every single part of them to memory.

"I'm glad I got to have this moment with you too," said Zou Yi with an honest big smile with red-rimmed eyes.

"We love you, and you and your sister need to look after each other and Grandpa too. I hope you make many more memories, little Yi, happy ones. We love you and we are cheering for both you and Liqin," said Zou Yi's mom.

"Blaze on ahead, little clan patriarch Yi," his father added with a cheeky smile.

"I will," Zou Yi answered as he watched his parents' bodies morph into a passage.

"So, this is this is what she meant..." Zou Yi muttered to himself.

"Thank you for giving me this," said Zou Yi as he gave a solemn ninety-degree bow within the fog.

He stayed that way for a few minutes and then rose up, wiped the remaining tears from his face, took a deep breath, and walked through the whirlpool passageway.

He felt his vision change, and when he came to, he found himself lying down on the grass in a fetal position.

"Brother!!!!"

Chapter 314 Disparity In Time

Zou Yi's vision was a little hazy, along with his senses which felt a little sluggish. He tried to hurriedly get up, however, he almost slipped, luckily someone was there to catch him before he could.

It took a few seconds before his vision adjusted to his surroundings.

"Zou Yi, drink this, it will help you with re-adjustment."

Just as Zou Yi was trying to readjust to the surrounding, he felt something squishy get shoved into his mouth.

"Li Qin, ARE YOU TRYING TO KILL ME?!" Zou Yi yelled as he coughed rapidly. The object shoved in his mouth was anything but sweet. It was prickly to the tongue and set his tongue on fire within milliseconds, which then turned to a frozen tundra a second after.

In a few breaths it wasn't only his tongue that was affected but his entire body too. He almost thought his sister was an impostor sent to poison him. They were in a test after all. However, he felt his body get reinvigorated and he could finally control his body along with his senses, well.

He could finally get a picture of where he was. He couldn't help but hold his breath from what he saw. There were maple and cedar trees around littering the ground with their orange-red leaves. The grass was green and there was a mildly chilly atmosphere in the air. The spiritual qi was dense but not to the point it overwhelmed them. It was gentle and seemed to be evenly spread around with the cool winds.

Zou Yi felt a cup of ginseng would go well with the environment. He stood silently in place admiring the view while his arm was still supported by his sister.

"Li Qin, what did you feed me?" he asked when he was finally done getting his fill of the view.

"I got it from He Shan, he told me it's called the cold blazing lime. It helps renew someone in a disoriented state especially one with a concussion," answered Zou Li Qin as she let go of Zou Yi so he could stand by himself.

"Since when were limes, slimy and prickly?" Zou Yi asked, not buying his sister's explanation at all. As he swallowed it, he felt it move. It felt more like a living thing than a fruit.

"We need to get going before others appear," Zou Li Qin awkwardly said as she dragged Zou Yi along to where He Shan and Yu Mei were.

It was only when Zou Li Qin said those words did Zou Yi realize something he had overlooked. Why did he wake up on the floor, when just seconds ago he was walking, but despite all that, there was one thing he had to confirm, now that he had the chance.

"Li Qin, the test..." Zou Yi paused halfway through the expression as he saw a sad expression in his sister's eyes.

"Did you see Mom and Dad?" Zou Yi asked after firming himself.

Zou Liqin paused her steps with her gaze fixed on Zou Yi as a complicated look flashed in her eyes.

"I did not," answered Zou Liqin.

Zou Yi wasn't sure, but for how long he knew his sister, he felt there was something off about his sister, a fear that was in her. It was in her mannerism as she answered.

"Liqin what did you see in there?" cautiously asked Zou Yi.

"Something I hope never happens," she answered back with a pitiful smile, which confirmed to Zou Yi that something happened to her within that foggy realm.

"It's only because of Yu Mei that I was able to make it out," she added.

Zou Liqin's response only drew more questions from Zou Yi, however judging from how perturbed and cagey she seemed to be, he doubted he could get anything from her, and digging in might be even more detrimental.

Zou Yi could only sigh at this as he made a mental note to repay the favor to Yu Mei for saving his sister, which he didn't know how she even did it. He assumed that foggy realm isolated people individually, and some part of him felt it wasn't a real space, considering how when he came to, he was on the ground in a disoriented state.

Lu Mei and He Shan were not too far away from him. He Shan was still the same; he had a bow in hand, warily looking around being on guard against potential threats. He maintained a careful distance from Yu Mei.

As for Yu Mei, she was no longer dazed, and Zou Yi wasn't too sure but she felt different. Her eyes seemed clearer than before and she seemed freer.

"He Shan, Yu Mei, I'm glad you all made it out safely," said Zou Yi as he greeted them both with a smile that earned him a nocked arrow from the wary, He Shan. He couldn't help but smile bitterly at this.

"I'm glad you made it out safe too," replied Yu Mei with a smile.

"Wait, how long has it been since I reappeared?" Zou Yi suddenly asked.

He had been through a rollercoaster of emotions from walking in the lonely fog for hours on end, meeting his parents and their parting, and finally reappearing in a groggy state that he forgot he had spent at least four hours in whatever place that foggy area was.

He didn't know how big the mountain they were on, was but four hours was a long time for the other participants to make significant headway.

"You appeared, a few minutes after Yu Mei and I showed up. He Shan was already here, when we arrived," answered Zou Liqin.

"He Shan, how long did it take you to arrive here?" asked Zou Yi.

"A few hours," He Shan carelessly answered as he kept a close eye on the surrounding.

"Can you be exact?" asked Zou Yi with an exasperated look.

"I don't know, I was hunting the whole time. Time went away from me, and I was here before I knew it. I didn't even get to eat my kill after all the effort I put into tracking it," grumbled He Shan.

"What about you two?" asked Zou Yi when he realized he wouldn't make any headway with He Shan.

Zou Liqin seemed a little bit hesitant on answering at first before she said,

"Four years."

Chapter 315 First Participant To Pass

Zou Yi's eyes almost popped out of their sockets at her answer.

"Four?" he asked in disbelief. However, he toned down when he saw the same guilty awkward look he saw earlier when he asked her if she saw their parents.

"Not more than five minutes have passed since we went through the waterfall and arrived here."

Yu Mei who had been silent, spoke.

Zou Yi found it hard to believe. Lu Mei as if reading on it, added,

"That place operates differently than here. Years could pass there, and it wouldn't be more than a few minutes here. Your real body wasn't there."

"What was that place?" asked Zou Yi in confusion.

"Your heart, I think," answered Yu Mei. Her response triggered a reaction from Zou Liqin whose look turned grimmer.

'What happened to her in there? What did she experience for those four years?' Zou Yi inwardly.

Whatever happened to her had left a mark, and for something to have such an impact on her after what they have endured and overcome over the years, Zou Yi couldn't help but worry how bad it was.

"Since we have all made it through, maybe we should discuss on how to go forward from here. Based on what Lu Mei has said, then that means the other participants aren't far ahead of us, even the ones that left earlier than us," said Zou Yi.

"About that, He Shan said he saw a few unconscious bodies about 1 kilometer that way," Zou Liqin said as she pointed to the west of them.

"Unconscious how? From an attack?"

"No, they were just like how we found you," He Shan casually answered as he made his way toward them and carelessly sat down.

"How sure are you it wasn't an attack from something?" asked Zou Yi.

"I may not have a high cultivation base but as a hunter who has lived his life teetering on the brink of death half the time, I think I'm experienced enough to tell if someone has been attacked or not.

Their breathing was normal, their heart rate and pulse were steady, I searched their bodies, and they had no visible markings and I used some of the methods I know for checking poison but none of them registered anything," answered He Shan with dissatisfaction at being doubted.

No matter how clumsy he looks, he seems like a pretty thorough person

thought Zou Yi as he evaluated, He Shan with a new look.

"Can someone be trapped in there forever?"

Zou Yi decided to direct that question to the one person who seemed to know more about the place they were in, Yu Mei.

"It's possible," answered Yu Mei.

She didn't need clarification on what Zou Yi was getting at. The unconscious participants He Shan saw could be those who failed to overcome whatever it was they saw in the foggy realm.

"Well, it's to our favor the more unconscious participants there are. Now our main focus is what we do next.

I think we need to put all our efforts into searching for the special zones, and along the way, we can also look for some of the herbs listed in the booklet, which we can use at the special zones.

Our current strength should be pretty clear.." Zou Yi paused as he eyed the three.

"I don't think we can make it far with our present strength. We need to increase it somehow. We either improve our cultivation base or we improve on our techniques or we do both.

But whichever option it is, we can't act on it without the special zones that guarantee protection.

What do you guys think?" asked Zou Yi.

"But how do we find the zones, it's not like we were given a map that highlights those zones. Other than the bullfrog symbol we have nothing else to work with," said He Shan.

"I agree with He Shan, we could spend endless hours looking for it. Maybe we could scale the mountain as we look for it, so we don't lose on time," said Zou Liqin.

"Yu Mei, do you have any thoughts?" asked Zou Yi.

"Well, I don't know if this will help, but I've been sensitive to certain things and areas ever since I was a child. Some are usually good, but some are bad, however, I never know if they are good or bad before stepping into or coming into direct contact with those things.

Though more often than not it's usually bad things," Yu Mei said as she chuckled bitterly.

The trio couldn't help but sigh when they saw her look. They were all intimately familiar with that type of look, a look borne of tragedy.

"While we don't have a map showing the location of those special zones, their existence in and of itself is the only thing we need.

He Shan whenever you go for hunts that last days on end, which places do you choose to sleep in at night?" asked Zou Yi with a smile.

"Depends on a number of factors, the area I'm hunting, the beasts and plants in the area, the weather...."

Zou Yi regretted asking that question as He Shan rattled on endlessly with so much passion that he even returned the bow to his back so he could have free room in his hands to describe things better.

When it hit the ten-minute mark and He Shan showing no signs of stopping, Zou Yi was forced to interrupt him, lest they spend hours being guided on how to sleep during a hunt.

"What I was getting at is this, the special zones will be anomalies in this place, especially if this mountain is filled with dangerous things such as spirit beasts or plants.

For those places to be safe they must have features that deter those things from coming there. The more dangerous a place is, the easier it will be to spot them.

We only need to search for those places with such a thought in mind and lucky for us we have a seasoned hunter who knows how to track and study the habits of spirit beasts, and we have someone who is sensitive to both good and bad things.

With such things working for us, it's only a matter of time before we find the special zone," Zou Yi said with a triumphant smile.

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"Looks like the twins made it?" said Kang Huilang.

"I thought they both would, I didn't expect Zou Liqin to almost fail. The tragedy from back then still has a hold on her. It may affect her future forward if she doesn't address it," said Yang Qing as he sighed.

"It was surprising. If she gets in, the instructors can help her work through it, and luckily, she is aware of it now thanks to the waterfall," said Dai Chen.

"I didn't expect someone with the crystal heart glazed physique to appear among the participants. The special inquisitors are sure to scoop her up immediately should they hear of her," said Xia Boqin as his gaze fell to the bottom of the mountain.

"It's a wonder how she has survived this long."

"Maybe the place she lived at, those around her didn't know, otherwise her fate would have taken a downward turn. Luckily, she is here.

"Will you exempt her from the test? With her physique and the dangers surrounding it, even if she fails, we can't let her go back, it's no different than sentencing her to a painful death."

"She's already exempt but I think I'll let her continue the test. It may be good for her and I'm curious how this team will perform," said Yang Qing.

Chapter 316 Zou Liqin's Experience

"Liqin, I hope you do better than the first part," Yang Qing muttered to himself as his gaze fell on her.

Of the areas he thought they would struggle with; he didn't expect them to stumble at the first test. After interacting with them for quite some time Yang Qing thought they'd both be able to get through, though he thought they may struggle with it for a bit, he thought it wouldn't be enough to stump, however both their performances had surprised him.

Zou Yi performed excellent and Zou Liqin would have failed had Yu Mei not stepped in and saved her using her physique's latent abilities.

The first test involved the participant passing through the heart-cleansing waterfall. This was a natural Dao treasure. In terms of grade, one could classify it as an ascendant grade treasure, however, its worth was much more than that as it approached saint grade treasures in terms of importance.

One of the key reasons Yang Qing chose this location was because of its existence.

The waterfall had the ability to dig out one's own desire as long as you stepped through it, your deepest wants would be brought to the surface by it. It would use those desires and wove a phantasm world around it, and then it would drag your soul into that world.

The thing you held deeply would be dug out by that waterfall, and it would use other things within the person's heart to supplement the main feeling.

Yu Mei's advice to the team before they stepped into the waterfall though simple, highlighted the main aspect of it, which was sincerity. The sincerity of the heart.

From his interaction with the Zou siblings, he felt as though they had been deeply affected by the loss of their parents, and in the manner in which they lost them, they seemed to have come to terms with it, even though it still saddened them, it did not seem to have a negative hold on them.

Thus, in the first part of the test, Yang Qing had a feeling they would see their parent's in there and though it may be hard for them, they would eventually get through it. However, things went a completely different route for the two of them.

Yang Qing had expected a bit of bitterness, and anger before finally coming to terms with everything, which would finally allow them to pass the test, however when it came to Zou Yi, there was no anger, bitterness, or the negative emotions Yang Qing had expected.

About the only thing that seemed negative was the solitude, which Zou Yi seemed to have handled splendidly, and when it came to his heart's desire, what he wanted most was closure. To have a proper goodbye with his parents and for him to tell them he and his sister were okay.

When he had that, the test ended. Yang Qing was genuinely surprised by it, and then when it came to Zou Liqin, she also went outside his expectations. She was silent, and seemed more composed than Zou Yi when they first met, so Yang Qing expected she'd have an easier time in the heart-revealing waterfall than Zou Yi, but that wasn't the case.

The deepest sentiment for Zou Liqin was brought to the surface, it was fear. Fear of losing her one living relative, Zou Yi. In the illusion created by the waterfall, both Zou Yi and Zou Liqin passed their test. It was so vivid that Zou Liqin couldn't tell it was an illusion.

After the test, Zou Yi insisted they go deliver the news in person to their grandfather, which Zou Liqin happily agreed to. However, that was when things went wrong. They got attacked as they were making their way over to the Zou clan's main family grounds.

The attackers critically injured Zou Yi who put himself in danger to ensure Zou Liqin's survival. Zou Yi died soon after and Zou Liqin was forced to escape by herself. She was on the run for months before finally, she lost her pursuers, whom she still didn't know their identities.

They were dressed as bandits but they moved as cultivators who had been well trained, which was why despite the protective measures they had on them, courtesy of the Order, they still suffered a loss.

She was on the run for a year before she finally managed to get one of the Order's branches. There she quickly asked for help on behalf of her brother. When they went to the site they had been attacked, there was no body or any evidence that they had been attacked.

Zou Liqin almost went mad with grief, and then that's when flames of vengeance were ignited in her. She hid it well, but she used the Order's resources to investigate her brother's murder. After one and half years, the investigation led her to an assassin organization that had ties to an elder of the Zou family.

She was in shock when she found out, which then turned to unrestrained fury. The Zou clan killed her parents and now her brother. She restrained herself and planned for months on how to exact her revenge, starting with the assassin organization responsible for her brother's death.

For whatever she had planned, she decided against involving the Order. She researched hundreds of taboo and fiendish arts belonging to different nefarious organizations, which she then used to massacre

the assassin organization and left breadcrumbs that would lead to the dark organizations whose skills she used in the act.

The plan was well crafted and meticulous. She had even conveniently left a few survivors and witnesses that would report the news to the Zou elder with ties to that organization. The plan worked well, and the Zou clan elder used his pull within the clan to attack the dark organizations he thought were responsible, who retaliated in return and soon a large-scale battle ensued.

However, it wasn't chaotic enough, so Zou Liqin schemed and had one of the young talents of the Chu clan get killed in the skirmish between the two sides. The Chu clan was a rank 2 family at the same level as the Zou clan, and the two clans had the worst of relationships that dated back to their third ancestor.

Chapter 317 Surprising Participants

Once the death of a Chu clan member spread, Zou Liqin's fuse worked perfectly, as the Chu clan was now thrown into the fray. A large-scale chaotic battle ensued for the next two years, with Zou Liqin taking advantage of it, to kill anyone from the Zou clan. She was determined to slaughter them all.

The shy girl had turned into an insidious killer who had no bounds on the means she could use for her goal. Poison, curses, frame jobs, nothing was below her.

Her spree however soon came to an end, when her grandfather who was still at the Zou clan, accidentally died in one of her schemes, when someone from the Chu family attacked. Bereft with grief, she sought to end her life, luckily before she could Yu Mei pulled her out of the nightmare.

The whole event was seen by Yang Qing and the rest because of a special artifact made from the origin of the waterfall. Yang Qing saying he was surprised by how things turned out, was an understatement. He didn't expect Zou Liqin to have that side in her.

Had Yu Mei not intervened, Zou Liqin would have suffered elimination. With what they saw, it was already grounds to disqualify her as an unstable element, but the Order had ways to help her deal with whatever traumas and issues were buried in her heart. Therefore, Yang Qing decided to allow her to continue with the test and there was also another factor at play, Luck.

To mortals, Luck was something intangible and unassuming, but to cultivators, it was a very real thing and Zou Liqin had it going for her when she decided to invite Yu Mei who ended up being a lifeline for her.

While Luck was an ethereal concept to cultivation, it was counted as a real thing, as a fabric of the world like space, time, karma, and other major Dao that guided the functionality of the world, luck could be counted amongst them.

Every cultivator especially those who have made a name for themselves, usually had the highest amount of luck, if luck was quantifiable. The two could not be separated from each other. Suddenly stumbling into a natural herb that conveniently helps you awaken your bloodline, resting in a cave that has spirit meridian with Dao properties to it that help you gain enlightenment, walking into a ruin that has been ransacked clean but you end up picking up a broken assumed object that turns out to hold a long-lost legacy.

Every single one of these events had the thread of luck on it, and every single cultivator including Yang Qing has been touched by it, and now so has Zou Liqin. Who knows she may very well end up doing something monumental in the future, and this was the moment that triggered it for her. Yang Qing was willing to let her have that chance and find out, despite how worrying thoughts.

...

"This test sure has its share of surprises," said Yang Qing as the rest nodded along in agreement.

There was Yu Mei with the crystal-glazed heart physique. Gaining that physique was a blessing and a curse. No matter whether you were born with a powerful background or a normal setting or dire circumstances, every holder of that physique rolled a dice if the physique would be a blessing to them or a curse.

The physique itself other than not granting the user any outstanding physical abilities could be considered a top-tier physique. It imbued the owner with clarity, and this clarity didn't only translate to knowing themselves, it touched even Dao.

Every owner of that physique was immune to illusion and effects that targeted their mind and hearts. They could not be beguiled easily, especially if the means involved using their deepest desires like the

heart-cleansing waterfall. This was why Yu Mei remained unaffected in the waterfall and even had time to save Zou Liqin who almost lost herself in there.

In addition the more the user excavated their physique, the immunity even spread to poison and curses. However, the thing that made it a top-tier physique was its ability to sensitize its user to the Dao at an early age, as early as even birth at times.

Every owner of the crystal-glazed heart physique was guaranteed to reach the palace realm at the very least. And this was even without having any cultivation art or resources to their name. All cultivation arts in essence, their purpose was to help the cultivators to get attuned with the Dao, which was already one of the fortes of the crystal glazed heart physique.

However, despite such a heaven-defying opportunity, most users of this physique never reached their full potential. The reason for this ironically was because of the Dao advantage afforded to every user of the crystal-glazed heart physique.

Every single user had a crystal heart in them that grew more powerful, the more their cultivation base grew. That crystal heart was the reason for their deaths. Were it consumed by someone at the peak of the palace realm their chances of breaking through to the domain realm and surviving their tribulation were increased drastically due to the effect of the crystal heart allowing them to deepen and firm their understanding of their own Dao.

When news broke of the crystal heart increasing the odds of a cultivator breaking through to the domain realm, the whole continent was sent into an uproar with every known owner of the crystal glaze heart physique getting hunted.

Sect clashed against sect, kingdom against kingdom, empire against empire soon it spiraled inwards; fellow clan members turned on each other to the point parent turned against child and vice versa. As long as you had the crystal glaze heart physique you couldn't trust your mother, father, sister, brother, master, sect master, martial siblings, or any other person with that revelation. Gaining the chance to enter the domain realm was temptation enough to blur the lines of such relationships.

Having such a physique soon became a death sentence. It didn't matter whether you were born in a rank 2 organization or some non-descript shack somewhere. Your fates could very well go down the same route considering who finds out about your physique.

As time went by even hiding the physique became difficult. You could always rely on cultivators to be creative and determined when it came to the pursuit of powerful cultivation. Cultivation arts geared towards identifying those with the crystal-glazed heart physique numbered in the thousands, with constant improvements happening every other day.

Other than that, they also improved on the various methods of correctly harvesting the crystal heart for maximum efficacy. Medicine in the cultivation world stagnated, but when it came to butchering someone perfectly, the grounds it made were light years ahead of normal medicine. As long as something had use, you can be sure there is a cultivator somewhere who has an entire in-depth legacy on how to extract that object.

Yang Qing sometimes wondered about the first cultivator to discover the ability of the crystal heart, and what exactly was he/she up to at that moment. Was it by accident, or intentional?

For now, he could only sigh at Yu Mei's luck. At least within the Order, her safety could be guaranteed and those who made it through had some level of pride in their talent. They wouldn't stoop so low as to harvest the crystal heart to break through to the domain realm. The Order wasn't alone in this. The two Holy lands and some of the old and powerful rank 1 organizations such as the One thousand battle hall palace were similar in this regard. Most of the cultivators with Crystal glaze heart physique ended up seeking refuge in these organizations.

As far as Yang Qing knew, three of the hall masters at One thousand battle hall palace had the crystal glaze heart physique, and as for the Order, the Chief Inquisitor who was in charge of all the inquisitors including even the roaming and special inquisitor had a Crystal glaze heart physique. Yang Qing has never met them though.

Other than Yu Mei, there were also other surprising figures among the participants, and one of them was a seven-year-old boy who went toe to toe with the legacies when it came to the speed at which they scaled the mountain. They were already a third of the way through.

The seven-year-old boy had a special physique too. Yang Qing didn't know which one, but he felt it was oddly familiar. From what he could tell, the physique had a primordial origin, which he could tell from the purple aura that occasionally leaked from the body of the boy whenever he fought. He was a walking body of pure unadulterated destruction. The boy didn't have a cultivation base, but as he fought and moved up the mountain, his body broke through to the qi refinement realm.

This was the advantage of those with natural physiques, they could directly skip the body refining stage if the conditions were right. Among the participants present, that seven-year-old boy was the one that stood out the most.

Chapter 318 Long Forgotten Memories

The young boy was trailing behind two legacy disciples, though he wasn't that far back. The mountain itself in terms of scale was as big as a major town of a rank 2 empire which loosely translated into the largest capital of a rank 4 empire or kingdom.

The surface area at the base of the mountain was large and it would only narrow down the higher up the peak one moved. Therefore, the participants would have low chances of stumbling onto each other in the early stages of the test, though stumbling onto each other wasn't a foregone conclusion, even at the early stages.

But, for the moment none of the participants had met up yet. From their files, the seven-year-old boy was called Liao Jiayi and was the son of a retired low-ranking soldier from a rank 4 kingdom. As for the two legacies ahead of him; both were of similar age and sex. They were 13-year-old males both in the fourth stage of the qi refinement realm.

One was dark colored and the other had brown almond hair. From what Yang Qing knew, the dark-colored one was the son of an Order employee who worked in the beast-taming hall as for the brown almond haired one, one of his parents worked as a blacksmith in the craftsmanship division while the remaining two legacies had parents in the same division, which was the external logistics division.

It came as no surprise to Yang Qing and the rest on the excellent performance of the legacies thus far, however, the other participants were not bad either. Other than the seven-year-old boy, there were other standouts behind them;

There were the twin brothers who seemed to have mastered a blue-grade cultivation art even though it was just the preliminary phase, it was still a feat. The blue-grade art gave them elemental attributes. The burly one had a sturdy defense and was in tune with the earth element while the scholarly looking had radiant blue lightning flash around his body. They were seamless in their cooperation and they complemented each other perfectly.

Other than them, among the special participants there was a 14-year-old girl who had unlocked her mental sea due to her abnormally large soul. She could already deploy spiritual sense that covered a five-meter radius around her. However, her soul was too powerful for her body to handle, and she struggled to react to what her senses detected, in addition, her body had an imbalance due to her overly powerful soul. Her cultivation base was at the third stage of the qi refinement realm, however, her soul based on Yang Qing estimates had the same strength as a freshly broken-through core formation expert.

'As long as she finds one of the special zones, and starts practicing the 108 steps of the autumn leaves, she should be able to alleviate some of the pressure from her body,' thought Yang Qing.

The cultivation art was comprehensive and touched up on the foundation of all the major facets of cultivation which included body and soul-strengthening techniques, and with Yang Qing's additional notes, he even added means of trying to achieve equilibrium between the two, which was built upon his experiences with his Yin Yang jade bone physique that granted him a soul and a body that was at the same level of strength, as one of its effects.

As long as the lady with the powerful soul gained sufficient time to strengthen her body, and also gain insight on how to properly use her soul without straining herself, she would be a serious contender for being among the first people to make it to the top of the mountain. As far as advantages go, a spiritual sense had the greatest advantage even when pitted against all the physiques Yang Qing had noted among the participants present.

The spiritual sense was an advantage only those in the core formation realm could have. Even though her range was just five meters, which was lower than the range a first-stage core formation expert would get, she still enjoyed the benefits of a true spiritual sense within those five meters. An all-round sense that is able to capture everything by magnifying their presence to the user. Things that could escape the eye or the ears, would be easily captured by a spiritual sense.

When venturing into an unfamiliar place, a cultivator's spiritual sense was one of their lifelines. Yang Qing was eager to see how things would pen out at the end.

His gaze then trailed off to the other participants. He couldn't help but sigh at the level of talent he saw. There was already a promising alchemist in the midst, and a blacksmith. The two had already stumbled onto one of the special zones and were hard at work using their respective strengths to try and increase their odds from within the special zone.

"It looks like the Order still holds sway over the populace, despite the things that have been happening off-late."

Yang Qing couldn't help but sigh as he took count of over fifty participants who had the talent to be named elite disciples within any of the high-ranking organizations that were at rank 3 and above.

Yang Qing's gaze then trailed over to Lai Rou's position. He held a favorable impression of the tall youth for his guts to be the first to ask a question despite being overly terrified. Yang Qing admired his tenacity, and in terms of talent, even if Yang Qing still didn't see anything that stood out, he still thought Lai Rou had done well for making it through the heart-cleansing waterfall.

About a third of the participants had already been eliminated by the waterfall, while those that passed through some of them had already fallen before they climbed very high.

Lai Rou was still holding on despite having one of the weakest cultivation bases. He was even weaker than the Zou siblings seeing how he was only at the iron stage of the body-refining realm.

He was extremely cautious in his approach in using unconventional routes such as using his lanky build to scale up trees with thick canopies and moving slowly from tree to tree to keep out of sight. His progress was slow but it was still there.

'mmh," Yang Qing's brows furrowed as he cast a close eye on Lai Rou.

"Guys what do you think of that kid, Lai Rou?" asked Yang Qing with his gaze not leaving the person in question.

"I can't believe he is only 13 with that build. If he had some meat in him, he would be terrifying," Kang Huilang offhandedly said as he threw some sesame seeds and wine in his mouth.

'Has he come here just to eat,' thought Yang Qing. He kept those thoughts to himself since Huilang's help with the cultivation art was crucial to the test, especially the last special part of the test.

Thus, Yang Qing decided to give him a pass this time as he said,

"I was talking about his coordination and movement."

"He is very agile for his tall build, almost as if he is using the air to propel himself forward and the darkness of the canopy doesn't seem to affect him one bit," Xia Boqin said.

"He seems to have fine control of every part of his body. No movement is wasted, and his shoulder movements are too fluid, almost as if there is no halt in his rotator cuffs. It looks like he is dislocating his shoulders.

I wonder what he went through that made him adopt such extreme means," said Dai Chen.

"If I was to guess, he worked in a mine, and with a build like that he had to find a way to handle those small shafts," said Kang Huilang.

He was no longer casual as before but instead had a rare austere look to him.

"His movements are of someone swinging a pick axe, and with how dark those mines sometimes get, handling a little darkness from the canopy should be no problem for him.

I think he may have a talent for the sword or the saber. His skill with his movement, and the flexibilities of his wrist and shoulder, coupled with his reach, I think he'd make a terrifying sword or saber expert," added Kang Huilang.

His entire focus was completely drawn to Lai Rou.

The others sighed when they saw Kang Huilang's look. Before he joined the Order, Kang Huilang was a slave who worked in the spirit stone mines of some long-forgotten sect. The mines were a death trap. Other than threats from the sect to meet their quotas, the mines were also littered with ferocious spirit beasts.

The sect used them as both miners and cannon fodder to scout the mine for any hidden dangers. Kang Huilang only survived that place because he unlocked his peerless jade physique within that mine and made an escape during spirit beast tide that created the perfect opportunity for his escape.

Lai Rou's form might have dug long-forgotten memories from him.

Chapter 319 Starting From The West

"Explains why he kept reminding me of Yi Jie when we just started at the Institute," said Yang Qing as his eyes gleamed in interest while observing Lai Rou.

"Seems like your siblings are finally about to make a move," said Xia Boqin.

Yang Qing quickly shifted his focus toward them at Xia Boqin's mention. Even though he was completely impartial in setting up the test and its eventual supervision, deep down he hoped the two siblings would make it and there were those he hoped, wouldn't. But regardless of his sentiments, those who made it to his table would gain entry whether he liked it or not, while those who failed to make the cut would get eliminated regardless if he wanted them to stay or not.

It was up to Zou Yi and Zou Liqin to ensure their entry into the Order. All Yang Qing could do for them is secretly cheer them on and wish them luck.

...

"Before we start, I think from this moment forward, He Shan you should take the lead," said Zou Yi as he solemnly pointed at, He Shan.

"What do you mean?" asked He Shan in confusion.

"While we may not know what things have been placed on the mountain to serve as our test, its base value is still a mountain and the things that constitute one.

I don't know about Yu Mei, but Liqin and I have little to no experience when it comes to such a setting..."

"I don't either," interjected Yu Mei

"With Yu Mei, that makes it all of us except you. You are the only one of us who knows how to survive on a mountain. The experiences we have may not serve us too well there, as such I suggest He Shan you take the lead and guide us on what to do and don't do so we don't end up being a burden or make careless mistakes there.

We may not be strong, yet, but the insights you have He Shan, may very well help us to gain ground in there," said Zou Yi.

"You want me to be the leader?" asked He Shan incredulously

"In part yes, if we hope to make it through," said Zou Yi as he lightly smiled at the shocked look on, He Shan.

"Okay you're sure you want that?" asked He Shan still eyeing Zou Yi and the rest suspiciously.

"I am, what about you Liqin and Yu Mei? Do you have any objections to my suggestion?"

"I don't" simultaneously answered Zou Liqin and Yu Mei.

He Shan still didn't seem like he believed them and kept thinking it was some sort of trap. He eyed them suspiciously for a few seconds before he sighed and decided to go along with it.

"Fine, but you all have to do what I say to the letter," said He Shan as he purposely eyed Zou Liqin and Yu Mei.

"What do we need to know and do?" said Zou Yi to move things along. They were already short on time and didn't have much of it to deal with He Shan's overly apprehensive nature.

"First things first, whatever notions you have about hunting, throw them out the window. It doesn't work with spirit beasts; some may use your understanding of what's normal to trick you and before you know it your legs are in some spirit beast's mouth.

The name of the game is stealth supplemented by speed," He Shan said as he eyed the trio like a seasoned senior and they were his disciples swallowing his every word.

"These two components will determine how far we reach. If we are to make it far one cannot exist without the other. Speed without stealth will only expose us easily, the same thing can be said about stealth without speed."

He Shan paused as he saw the looks of confusion from the trio.

"Like I said spirit beasts subvert the norm. When you are being stealthy with no speed, you will be still, avoiding making movements and slowly creeping about. This makes you an easy target for any spirit beast that has a better reaction and sensory perception than us.

There are spirit beasts whose forte lay in precisely that, hunting stealthy creatures.

While you are stalking other creatures, they are stalking you, and with your speed at an all-time low, there's no easier target.

I almost died of an attack from a mahogany cloud luster viper that used that same move. I was hunting a purple arc hare and therefore had to be stealthy. I stalked it for weeks; with no idea, I was being hunted too.

That damn viper was sneaky and greedy. It waited until I had successfully shot the hare before it attacked me. This way it could have two prizes for the price of one and it would have succeeded too had I not smeared the dung of a night stream elephant on myself, which gave me the much-needed protection from its fangs," He Shan said visibly frightened.

"This brings me to my next point, survival is all that matters in there, it doesn't matter how or what, you just have to do it. If we have to bury ourselves in a pit of dung to survive, we do it, if we need to hide in

the rotting carcass of some beast, we do it, or apply mildly poisonous herbs and putrid-smelling extracts on ourselves, we do it.

And finally..." He Shan paused slightly for pure theatrics. He clearly seemed to enjoy having the trio have their entire focus centered on him, though occasionally he would reach for his axe on reflex before he relaxed his hands.

"If we are unlucky and end up getting noticed by a spirit beast, we have no chance at all of defeating, then ignore the first rule about being stealthy and speedy.

In that moment make as much chaos and noise as you can, the louder the better. We need to draw as much attention to our area as we can, by some luck a stronger spirit beast will appear, or the spirit beast attacking us will grow wary and choose to escape.

However, if it decides to attack, we are to run in different directions, but that's only if it's a single spirit beast if they are two or three, it's safer to stick together.

I don't have time to tell you everything, just keep those three in mind as for the rest, I'll mention them as we move up the mountain, after all, every place has a different set of rules," said He Shan.

The trio nodded to him as they got up.

"Yu Mei which side would you choose for us to enter the mountain from?" asked Zou Yi.

Yu Mei was surprised by the sudden question but nonetheless answered after she gave it some careful thought,

"That side," said Yu Mei as she pointed in the north-northeast of their direction.

"Great, the far west it is," the trio instantaneously said. With Yu Mei admitting her natural affinity towards dangerous situations, she was the best danger sensor available.

The west was likely to be safer for them than whatever awaited them in the north-northeast direction.

I hope that girl picked that side thought He Shan as he remembered the yellow-haired girl.

Chapter 320 Beauty Of Autumn

The team followed He Shan's instructions to the tee. He Shan led the front while Zou Yi held up the rear and Zou Liqin and Yu Mei were placed in the center.

Yu Mei was the weakest of the group with no cultivation base, therefore it was safer to have Zou Liqin next to her in case something unexpected happened.

Since they were a freshly formed team, their coordination wasn't up to par, but the trio still tried to heed He Shan's instruction, while He Shan adjusted slowly adjusted his movements to sync up with them, while he guided them on how to synch up with each other, especially with Yu Mei on the team.

Every time he saw her slow labored pace, he couldn't help but sigh. Despite hearing from Zou Liqin about how Yu Mei had saved her life, He Shan still felt that Yu Mei would be a burden to them going forward, and seeing her current performance, only solidified that thought.

He even saw Zou Liqin as another added burden too, especially with her confession of how she almost failed the first test. He Shan found it difficult to understand how someone could fail such an easy test. He had the easiest hunt of his time in the test, barely even breaking a sweat doing it, he couldn't understand how someone could almost fail such an easy test.

The only person in his eyes who seemed reliable was Zou Yi, however, Zou Yi felt too cunning to him. Every time he saw him, he would feel like he had the same sensation as that viper that almost killed him during his first years of learning to hunt.

This was why he was extremely hesitant at first in forming a team with them before he agreed to it. Part of the reason was, despite the cunningness he felt from Zou Yi, he also felt a staunch determination from him, that reminded him of his grandfather.

And if Zou Yi did try to stab in the back, well He Shan had experienced countless cunning opponents than the mahogany cloud lustre viper, he was confident he could carve himself an escape path from a human that didn't have the same explosive strength and abilities as some of the spirit beasts he fought against. He also knew of Zou Yi's weakness which was his sister. If worst comes to worst, he could always use her, which was why He Shan conveniently positioned himself closer to Zou Liqin than Yu Mei.

Of course, that distance wasn't noticeable to anyone else but him.

"Is He Shan scheming something," thought Zou Yi as he frowned. Years of surviving insidious schemes of the Purple City made him hyper-aware to the point his subconscious would register things that he couldn't yet make sense of.

However, he decided to shelf those thoughts and chalked them up to He Shan's paranoia rubbing off on him. At the moment he couldn't afford to be distracted by one iota, especially in a place where he felt he was completely out of his element.

They had been steadily running for close to ten minutes and in that time, they had not stumbled onto anything remotely threatening.

The west was densely packed with trees. It had the air of autumn to it. A faintly chilly breeze brushed up on their skins, above them were towering trees from red oaks, to maples, to fothergilla, to flame leaf sumacs and to sweat gums.

They all had the fiery red radiant beauty to their leaves that heralded autumn was here. Every time the wind blew and the leaves dropped, Zou Yi felt like shooting stars were dropping from those trees gently cascading down to the ground, adding a carpeted beauty to it, which was further enhanced by the gentle cascading sunlight glow that passed through the canopy.

The blowing wind, the rustling of the leaves, and the critter noises, all distinct combined together to form a gentle melody that would almost put you to slumber.

Zou Yi couldn't help but gasp at the beauty. He wasn't the only one as Zou Liqin and Yu Mei had eyes that glimmered to the picturesque landscape beauty around. Even He Shan despite scoffing in contempt at the amateurish display of the lot, would occasionally deep whiffs of the chilly air.

Who could blame him, it had that earthy autumn scent that seemed to calm their nerves every time they breathed it in.

The season of transition huh? Seems rather appropriate for the weather to be this way during the test. A transition of two extremes; those who pass the test will gain the opportunity to be reborn into dragons from lowly carp, and those who fail get thrown to the bottom forever doomed to be pitiful and forgotten.

I wonder which I will be at the end of it all.

Zou Yi smiled ruefully as he felt his inner poet being drawn out by the environment around him.

However, time for indulging and digging out his inner poet was cut short when He Shan drew his arrow without warning and fired at something to the left of their direction.

Almost simultaneously they had a clang sound like the sound of metal hitting metal.

Before the gang even registered what was going on, He Shan immediately yelled

"Liqin, Mei, drop to the ground!!" yelled He Shan as he simultaneously fired two arrows in their direction.

The two girls still couldn't make heads or tails of what was happening around them they were therefore in a fluster, but despite that they obediently followed He Shan's instruction and ducked to the ground.

It proved to be the right choice because almost instantaneously, Zou Yi had a swooshing sound above their heads, with strands of hair floating above them with singed edges.

He strained his eye and finally saw it, a tiny blurry scarlet object turning and immediately returning in the direction where He Shan had fired his first arrow.

What was that? Zou Yi fearfully wondered as he rushed towards his sister and Yu Mei to confirm they were okay.

That proved to be a reckless decision on his part because the moment he moved, he saw He Shan throw his axe at him.

"He Shan, you bastard?!" roared Zou Yi as he prepared to use his fist to deflect the axe.

The position he was in and the speed at which the axe was thrown made it hard for him to dodge. He could only hope his bronze body would be able to handle He Shan's rusty old axe.