

Medical 221

Chapter 221 Hurricane

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In contrast, Yan Xiaobao got off the carriage immediately after crossing the city wall and swiftly slipped into the bustling crowd flowing through the busy streets. At the moment, he wore his hometown's tattered clothes, with his hair bound beneath a bamboo conical hat.

The hat was created by Yan Xiaobao during his time at the academy. It was inspired by the conical hats used across South Asia. Its current purpose was not to shield from the sun, but rather to conceal Yan Xiaobao's unusual features.

Yan Xiaobao walked through street after street, slowly making his way toward the city center, where most of the marketplace squares were located. Although, had he stayed in the carriage, Yan Xiaobao could easily have arrived here, he also knew that he would attract incredible attention because everyone within the city could recognize that the carriage belonged to the City Lord Mansion.

As Yan Xiaobao stepped onto the streets, he took the time to observe and analyze the various shops. The suburban areas of the city were mostly residential neighborhoods, with large buildings resembling the City Lord Mansion, although they belonged to various noble families.

Between these family estates were ornate roads leading to the city center, with stunning mansions on either side belonging to wealthier merchants or traders. Some of these belonged to guards or mercenaries who succeeded in cultivation. These houses were considered middle class, with their own courtyards and auxiliary buildings.

The southern part of the city lacked large noble estates and middle-class mansions, instead being crammed with narrow streets made of stamped earth, with small huts pressed tightly against one another. Some were single-story homes, while others had additional houses stacked atop their roofs.

This area was the poorest district among the city's citizens, where residents took on any work they could find. Some worked as cleaners across the city, while others went to the rice fields as seasonal workers.

Gao Yan hailed from these regions, as did his friends. Lord Rong Liang had opened a Martial Arts School and allowed the children here to train, enabling them to earn stable incomes for themselves and their families, giving hope to these households in their daily lives.

Yan Xiaobao quickly passed through these areas. As he approached the center, he also observed the city's various markets. These markets were enclosed with several entrances, guarded by individuals wearing seals of different noble families.

It was evident that the markets were owned by noble families, and the shops within had to pay taxes for the right to operate. Yan Xiaobao cast a quick glance at these markets but soon decided not to enter.

Firstly, he was currently dressed in poor clothing, making him look like an impoverished commoner, and his likelihood of being allowed inside was minimal. Secondly, shops in the market tended to pay less for goods during purchases, as they had to pay taxes to the nobles.

Yan Xiaobao kept walking, searching for a shop that sold medicine. Nearly reaching the West Gate, he saw a small figure walking briskly—a student hurrying out of a shop, holding his chest tightly, constantly looking anxiously to his sides and over his shoulder.

Yan Xiaobao looked at the boy and sighed. It was clear he was carrying valuable goods, and his conspicuous demeanor made Yan Xiaobao quite certain this boy wouldn't make it home without being robbed.

Unfortunately, as the boy noticed Yan Xiaobao, his eyes widened, and on seeing the other side of Xiaobao, he jumped nervously, his legs moving so fast they seemed barely able to support him. Observing the retreating boy, Yan Xiaobao couldn't help but find the scene amusing, his lips curling into a slight smile. However, he had no time to continue observing the boy, as he now stood before the shop and removed his hat.

It was a small shack that seemed to have withstood the assault of hurricanes. The ceiling was riddled with holes, and the plaque on the door hung precariously from one corner, swaying in the narrow street's slight breeze.

The large characters for "Rong Kaijian's Great Medicine Bottle" were painted on it, though the paint had peeled off to such an extent that several letters were nearly illegible.

At first glance, Yan Xiaobao thought the shop was far too destitute to afford his pills. Yet, recalling the sight of another student clutching his chest tightly earlier, Yan Xiaobao decided to enter and give it a try.

Yan Xiaobao swiftly removed his hat, letting his hair fall freely. His eyes took on a faint white haze, transforming into features befitting a ten-year-old.

He hesitated momentarily before pushing open the door. Slowly, Yan Xiaobao stepped inside the shop. At first, everything was dark. There was no lighting within, and the only source of illumination seeped in from the street outside through the door frame.

The dim light revealed counters and cabinets made of glass, which once contained medicinal herbs. Some of the cabinets were empty, while the few visible plants were either long dead or had wilted due to improper handling.

Everything in the room was coated in layers of dust and grime, a clear indication that nothing had been touched for a long time. The only surface free of dust was the glass countertop.

The room was small, barely large enough to accommodate a few children, and no one was present at the moment. Behind the counter was an open doorway leading to another darkened room, from which a strong fragrance emanated. This scent was neither as clean or wholesome as the pills Yan Xiaobao's father usually brought home, nor as sweet or alluring as the pills he'd obtained the night before. It was pungent and slightly dizzying, though his Qi surged noticeably faster than usual.

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Suddenly, a sound echoed in the room, and a shadow appeared at the door. Yan Xiaobao focused his gaze on the shadow, and as the shadow took human form, he instinctively held his breath.

This woman was as unusual as Yan Xiaobao. Yan Xiaobao's hair was as white as freshly fallen snow, but this woman had golden hair that reminded him of cascading sunlight. Her curls framed her face, and her eyes were a golden hazel brown. When Yan Xiaobao looked into those eyes, he felt as though his soul was being drawn in, a wisdom incongruent with her youthful appearance lurking beneath them.

After a few moments, Yan Xiaobao found himself unable to breathe, his eyes gradually widening, and he lost control over his body. A feeling of weakness flooded his limbs, but as soon as it came, it disappeared, for the woman blinked.

She had a well-developed figure, and Yan Xiaobao estimated her age to be around twenty, yet her eyes betrayed an ancient essence. Yan Xiaobao immediately regretted stepping into this shop.

"Is there anything I can help you with?" the woman asked in a friendly voice as she walked to the counter, leaning against the glass, enthusiastically observing Yan Xiaobao.

Yan Xiaobao felt how Lan Feng had concealed herself, just as they did when encountering Lord Rong Liang. His gaze turned wary as he quickly retrieved a jade bottle from his pocket.

This transaction had to be completed quickly.

"I heard from a friend that you might be interested in buying medicine pills," Yan Xiaobao said hurriedly, but he didn't approach the counter or the woman. A sense of danger was lingering in his mind, and though he managed to suppress the impulse to flee immediately, he couldn't convince himself to move forward.

Upon seeing the wariness in Yan Xiaobao's eyes, the woman's smile broadened. With a gesture of her hand, the jade bottle flew swiftly into her palm, a speed so impeccable that even Yan Xiaobao's refined Flow couldn't intercept it.

The woman paid no heed to the flicker of concern in Yan Xiaobao's eyes. Instead, she sniffed the medicinal fragrance wafting from the opened jade bottle. Her eyebrows furrowed slightly, then she nodded again, resealed the container, and casually tossed it into the room behind her.

The loud clatter of the bottle colliding with other objects could be heard, but the woman seemed indifferent to the noise. Instead, she reached to her belt, retrieved a Memory Stone, and from it extracted a large burlap pouch. The metallic scraping sound immediately tipped off Yan Xiaobao—it was a coin purse.

Yan Xiaobao knew Memory Stones were often used as storage tools, but they were far more expensive than ordinary ones. Though the shop appeared dilapidated, it was evident the woman wasn't merely a poor pharmacist.

Without ever taking her eyes off Yan Xiaobao, she slipped her slender hands into the pouch, pulled out a few coins, and handed them to the white-haired boy. Without even looking at the coins, Yan Xiaobao gave the woman a slight bow and immediately exited the shop. He felt that lingering any longer might lead to him being preyed upon by a powerful beast.

Outside the shop, Yan Xiaobao once again donned his conical hat and darted into a busier street, blending into the flow of pedestrians and disappearing amidst the crowd.

After walking for a while, Yan Xiaobao turned into a narrow alleyway. Sitting in the shadows, he looked at his hands and was stunned to see the woman had given him three silver coins.

The currency of this new world was strikingly similar to the one he knew. One silver coin equaled a hundred copper coins, and one gold coin was worth a hundred silver coins. Beyond gold coins, there were even greater denominations—a thousand Gold Coins.

Though the medicine pills were expensive, three silver coins were a high price for Qi-capturing pills. These pills, crafted by apprentice alchemists during their practice sessions, were considered standard rewards from the Royal Academy for students. Normally, the pills would sell for around one silver coin, perhaps two, but the woman had given him three. Her generosity unsettled Yan Xiaobao instead of reassuring him, making him more wary. It was clearly an attempt to lure him back to her shop next month, but as Hui Ya pocketed the coins and disappeared into the crowd, Yan Xiaobao smirked faintly. He had no intention of returning next month.

"Smart," Lan Feng agreed with satisfaction. "Though the woman tried to tempt you, she didn't use her Spirit sense to scan you or employ Wu Wei. She has no way of noticing me, but I'd advise against approaching her in the future. She's clearly more than she appears."

Yan Xiaobao nodded in agreement as he headed toward a shop specializing in Memory Stones. The next phase of their plan—the most critical part—was about to unfold.

Back in the same dilapidated shop, the golden-haired woman remained at the counter, a radiant smile on her face and a glimmer of light in her hazel eyes—a light that hadn't been there before. As the woman gazed out the window, the image of the young white-haired boy lingered in her mind. Her lips curved into a chuckle as she turned and disappeared into the dark room at the back.

The sun towered high in the sky, bathing the streets in light, while waves of heat shimmered upward from the scorching pavement. The streets and roads were crammed with crowds of bustling people weaving through throngs of citizens.

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A white-haired young boy was slipping away from the busy adults nearby. He moved with a smoothness that made him much faster than the hurried passersby, yet no one seemed to notice this youth.

This young boy was clearly Yan Xiaobao. Earlier, he had visited a shop specializing in Memory Stones, only to be immediately thrown out by the shopkeeper, who assumed the boy was a poor commoner intent on stealing his wares.

In his small, childish hands were three silver coins. Though Yan Xiaobao had acquired these coins through legitimate means, he knew better than to take them out. The shopkeeper had already labeled Yan Xiaobao a criminal, and for a poor child to possess three silver coins would only make it obvious that he'd stolen them from a wealthy citizen. Taking the coins away from a sneaky little kid would inconvenience no one.

This realization kept Yan Xiaobao from lingering too long. Instead, he vanished back into the streets, merging with the crowd.

"Let's find an inn," Lan Feng said in an easygoing tone, recalling the extra coins they had earned. Purchasing two Memory Stones now seemed feasible, but they needed a place to sit and complete their planning once more. The time spent selling the medicine had taken longer than expected, and though Yan Xiaobao had the whole day ahead of him, he still needed to visit the City Lord's mansion later in the day.

Walking through the bustling streets, Yan Xiaobao quickly found a large inn and booked a standard room for a few copper coins. Once he reached the room, Yan Xiaobao slowly opened his bag and took out a few items.

The first thing that fell into his hands was a smooth piece of fabric—a high-quality robe gifted to him by his village when he left.

Yan Xiaobao knew that unless he wanted to exude leadership, he couldn't wear the robe, so he instead pulled out the blue trousers and shirt that lay beneath it. These clothes were relatively unremarkable, a neutral choice unlike anything he'd worn before.

After changing into the blue outfit, Yan Xiaobao carefully folded the white robe and placed it back into his old bag. He then retrieved a cone-shaped hat. This hat had been crafted during his leisure time at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, made from bamboo shoots he had found within the academy grounds.

The cone-shaped hat was inspired by those used in the old world, but unlike them, this hat wasn't meant to provide protection from the sun or rain. Instead, its purpose was to keep his face hidden. As he tied up his hair and donned the hat, nothing but his smooth white chin and his exquisite red lips were visible.

Finally, Lan Feng took a deep breath and released his aura, letting it envelop Yan Xiaobao. A gasp escaped from the stunned young boy as he felt the surge of energy within him being unleashed, causing the air around him to tremble incessantly. Layers of energy shielded his body, like waves that originated from Lan Feng within Qi Cave, spreading outward before dissolving into their surroundings.

To approach Yan Xiaobao while this Spiritual Energy was active required one to be at least a King-level expert. Alternatively, Lan Feng could grant someone access to the protective space, allowing them to benefit significantly from the excess energy ripples. freewebnovel.com

Yan Xiaobao himself could feel the Qi vortex surging within his body. It spun at such incredible speed that the threads of Qi disappeared from view, replaced by a white tornado. He could feel how the tornado continuously absorbed and refined the aura released by Lan Feng.

Although Yan Xiaobao hadn't bolstered his strength, he still sensed his sharpened perception as he stepped out of the inn. It felt as though Yan Xiaobao was no longer walking as he used to but gliding across the street.

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Chapter 224 Memory Stone

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This aura was not limited to Yan Xiaobao. Everyone near him could feel it. Even the bustling citizens, including those who used to disregard their surroundings, stepped politely aside, opening up a path for Yan Xiaobao to walk through.

To everyone present, this was clearly an expert who typically did not belong to this city. What's more, this expert far surpassed the nobles who once boasted about making the so-called "Kings of Experts" their family leaders.

Yan Xiaobao didn't move at an unusually fast pace. Instead, he spent a considerable amount of time heading towards one of the markets. He could have gone to the same shop as before, but he had no intention of assisting anyone who had previously pursued him.

Instead, he made his way toward the city's central area, where many markets were located. Yan Xiaobao wasn't foolish. He knew his sudden appearance had drawn the attention of several individuals who were now tailing him and monitoring his movements. Although Yan Xiaobao would typically ignore such people, he had now gained the ability to integrate with Lan Feng's Holy Spirit Halo.

When Yan Xiaobao sensed those following him, a slight smile crept onto his face as he headed toward a smaller market. The smaller markets were controlled by select noble families, and the shops within often sold staple goods at prices lower than those in the larger markets.

The larger markets could command higher prices because they often featured higher-grade magical artifacts, medicinal herbs, and mid-level Martial Arts skills. The smaller markets, on the other hand, were places frequented by mercenaries, while the upper-class preferred the larger markets.

If Yan Xiaobao had come to the market dressed in his old clothes earlier, he would likely have been denied entry. However, with his current demeanor and the extraordinary aura he exuded, no one dared to stop him.

The guards overseeing the market cast envious and slightly fearful glances at Yan Xiaobao, while the customers once again made room for him, leaving everyone in a state of silent satisfaction.

Yan Xiaobao took his time walking between different stalls, scanning the wares that included low-grade medicinal plants, blank scrolls, low-level Martial Arts skills, Low-level Magic Beast Cores, Low-level Magic Gems, low-quality weapons, low-quality armor, and low-quality Memory Stones.

Memory Stones were originally black gemstones with no actual abilities. However, each of them had a certain capacity to absorb spiritual energy and transfer it into tools used for recording. They could function as keys or even storage devices.

Low-level Memory Stones were stones capable of absorbing a small amount of spiritual energy and transforming into tools. They could record a Martial Arts or spiritual art skill, capturing a real action for a brief moment and preserving that action—or relaying a message to another person.

Due to their limited spiritual energy capacity, they were commonly used as containers for Martial Arts and spiritual art skills. Once the spiritual energy ran out, the Memory Stone would shatter, which often happened after being used a few times. Whether it was for Martial Arts, spiritual art skills, battles, or even sending messages to friends, this was their inevitable fate.

Considering that Yan Xiaobao and Lan Feng had three silver coins in their possession, they could have afforded mid-tier Memory Stones. However, the low-level variants were actually more advantageous, as only a limited few could access the information they held before they broke.

When a Memory Stone could only be viewed a few times, buyers were forced to restrict who could attempt to activate it, reducing the chances of it attracting unwanted attention. Furthermore, while some might extract knowledge from a Memory Stone into their minds, they'd be powerless to do so until they managed to activate it—without the ability to create new memories in the process.

Yan Xiaobao still harbored concerns about the entire plan of selling high-end Martial Arts techniques, yet whenever he sensed Lan Feng's Spirit, he felt an inexplicable excitement mixed with a trace of *schadenfreude* he couldn't understand.

"Lan Feng," he said while scanning the stall before him, "what's got you so excited?"

Although the two souls could perceive each other's emotions, truly understanding one another was impossible.

"Let me tell you a story," Lan Feng said in a patient tone, reminiscent of bedtime stories told to Yan Xiaobao during his childhood. "A long time ago, there was an expert here. This expert sold me two skills. One was a Martial Arts skill, and the other was a spiritual art skill. The prices for these two skills were

outrageous, but their abilities seemed well above average. In the end, I purchased a Memory Gem containing both skills, only to find I couldn't activate them. Before I finally succeeded in learning the Martial Arts technique, I had to try four times, and the Memory Stone shattered on my final attempt. On the other hand, the spiritual art skill still caused me some issues. It was designed for individuals with an affinity for water."

Even as he continued his explanation, the Phoenix was visibly suppressing some deep-seated anger.

"Honestly, it made me furious, and later, when I sought to track down the cultivator for revenge, I discovered someone had killed him. Imagine how that made me feel—angry but unable to do anything! Not anymore! This time, it's my turn to outwit a naive fool. I need to know if these two skills genuinely hold value for someone!"

As Lan Feng concluded his final sentence, he let out a low grunt followed by a maniacal laugh. Although this behavior made Yan Xiaobao question the rationale behind Lan Feng's suggestion to sell Martial Arts skills, he understood that even a Phoenix would struggle to easily activate them, which helped him regain his composure.

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Although the boy did feel a certain degree of relief, after successfully selling the Memory Gems, the Divine Beast within him imagined something and felt satisfied. Yan Xiaobao shook his head once more before selecting two gemstones. They were the lowest-grade Memory Gems he could find.

These Memory Gems could only hold martial arts or spiritual art skills up to three times. Though this sounded unbelievable, he believed they would fetch an astonishing price at the Black Market Auction House later.

Picking up the stones, Yan Xiaobao turned his face to the stall owner.

"I wish to purchase these two stones," he said in a childlike voice, causing the surrounding observers and civilians to think that the undercover expert was actually a woman—slender, standing only a meter and a half tall, frail in build, and with pale skin. Her voice was light but soothing, like steam drifting softly across a serene landscape.

Though the expert appeared to be a woman, the stall owner still looked at the figure with deep reverence and fear, bowing low with utmost respect.

"Milady, please don't take offense at this humble servant. I offer these stones to you as a token of my respect," he said, trembling slightly and stammering as he spoke.

Looking at the unknown expert, the stall owner thought this was simply a traveler passing through the city. The clothes were clearly male garments, yet they were made of rare fabrics not commonly seen in the area. The hat she wore was one he had never seen before, yet its meticulous craftsmanship left no room to suspect it was hastily made.

Upon hearing the stones were a gift, Xu Yue shrugged indifferently. After all, he was not a wealthy person; his entire fortune amounted to less than three silver coins.

Yan Xiaobao didn't mind being mistaken for a woman again. This time, it served as an advantage, further aiding in dispelling any doubts about his identity. He thanked the stall owner and turned to leave the marketplace, noticing the stall he had left behind suddenly bustling with tourists.

All the civilians from the market rushed to the stall to buy items from it. Even with the lowest-grade Memory Gems, it was apparent the stall owner's fortunes had significantly improved.

As Yan Xiaobao left the market and returned directly to the inn where he was staying, a faint smile appeared on his face.

He didn't go to the counter but walked straight to the room he had rented. Returning to the inn, Yan Xiaobao was acutely aware that informants from all the major factions within the city were tracking him. The next phase of his plan was critical.

Entering his room, Lan Feng quickly withdrew his aura, concealing it within himself. Yan Xiaobao then hastily changed back into his farmer's attire, stowing away the conical hat and clothing in his bag. He jumped onto the bed and began meditating, cultivating in stillness.

Soon, Yan Xiaobao heard footsteps moving outside in the hall and could discern muffled complaints through the old door. As Hui Ya tried to focus on his cultivation, a smile crossed his face.

A few minutes later, his door was forcibly opened. Standing outside were the innkeeper and a group of three men dressed in black, gazing into the dilapidated room where the impoverished cultivator resided.

Yan Xiaobao appeared stunned, staring at the intruders with wide eyes and trembling hands. The three men in black departed almost immediately, while the innkeeper quietly nodded and closed the door afterward.

Over the next hour, the three men in black scoured the inn, searching fruitlessly for what they were looking for. When Yan Xiaobao saw them leave the inn, an unapologetic grin spread across his face. Now was the moment to use the two Memory Gems and imprint Lan Feng's martial arts and spiritual art skills onto them.

Holding the stones in his hand, they were palm-sized, no more than half the size of his hand, and crudely formed with no refined edges. The stones were as rough as when the mercenaries had originally found them. Their surfaces were black and dull, showing clearly that they were low-grade stones, which only made Yan Xiaobao even more thrilled.

He picked up the first stone, slowly closed his eyes, and placed it against his forehead. The remaining marks depended on Lan Feng. Phoenix slowly moved a feathery finger to his brow, drawing a beam of light from the spot between his eyes.

The beam of light slowly condensed into a small orb, shining like a pearl. Under Lan Feng's careful guidance, it traveled through Yan Xiaobao's meridians until it reached his forehead, where it compressed along the last segment before leaving his body and entering the Memory Gem.

Once the orb left Yan Xiaobao's forehead, he slowly opened his eyes, only to be briefly blinded by the bright light as it entered the Memory Gem before him. It took a few minutes for the aura to dissipate and return to Yan Xiaobao.

When it did, the Memory Gem no longer appeared ordinary. The shape remained rough without polish, but its surface now gleamed as if filled with dark sunlight, with occasional wisps of white mist wafting within the stone.

Seeing the first skill successfully confined within the gem, Xu Yue couldn't contain his excitement and quickly repeated the process. As he gazed at the two stones in his hands, imagining how much they

might sell for, a wave of joyous anticipation surged through him. Hopefully, they would provide enough to purchase several medicinal pills. freewebnovel.com

After finishing with the two Memory Gems, Yan Xiaobao quickly changed his clothes again, waited for Lan Feng to release his spiritual energy, and then exited the inn, moving at a leisurely pace to ensure different followers caught sight of him.

Upon leaving the inn, Yan Xiaobao saw the sun nearing the city walls and couldn't help but knit his brows slightly. It indicated that the afternoon was waning, and he still needed to appear at the City Lord Mansion to attend the twins' banquet he had promised earlier.

Despite this, Xu Yue knew that rushing this part of the plan would gain him nothing, so he forced himself to walk slowly across the city, heading toward the Ma Family Mansion.

The Black Market Auction House, like most of the other major commercial buildings, was not situated in the center of the city but rather beside Ma Family's residence for optimal security purposes.

The Black Market Auction House did not need to pursue customers; visitors willingly traversed extra distances for the chance to buy rare treasures.

Although the Black Market Auction House bore that name, it was a highly reputable building and not seen as illegal or a hub for criminal activity.

The name originated from the policy upheld by the Ma family since the auction house's inception. When an item appeared at auction, its origins were irrelevant to them. Whether stolen, plundered, or acquired through murder, the Black Market Auction House showed no concern. Even heirlooms from fallen families sold at auction remained anonymous; preserving the seller's identity was paramount.

Once an item was sold through the Black Market Auction House, the new owner retained all rights to the item. It could only be transferred voluntarily, sold, or seized by force.

Seeing this display of opulence made arriving at the building an awe-inspiring experience for Yan Xiaobao.

The path leading to the Black Market Auction House was paved with marble and flanked by carefully manicured lawns. Embedded within the grass were towering trees pruned into geometric shapes, with jade statues adorning the center of the lawns.

Behind the picturesque scenery stood the main building adorned with golden decorations on all the pillars. Mystical beasts were intricately carved into the framework, while statues of animals—crafted from marble and jade—further accentuated the grandeur.

The doors, like the path, were marble, but the door frames and handles were crafted from pure gold. The entire color scheme was dominated by white, red, and black.

The premises were heavily guarded by teams of experts, whose patrols followed precise patterns. Even the guards at the entrance were at least at master-level cultivation.

As Yan Xiaobao walked along the marble path toward the Black Market Auction House, he noticed that those tailing him had scattered thus far.

Upon observing their movements, the white-haired youth couldn't help but chuckle. It was evident they were hurrying back to spread the news of Huiya's arrival at the Black Market Auction House.

A new expert arriving in the city and heading to the auction house could mean only one thing—a treasure was about to be sold, and everyone wanted the first chance to acquire it.

The whole day of leading these followers was intentionally designed to ensure the number of experts aware of his visit to the Black Market Auction House increased.

Walking along the pathway, a smile spread across Yan Xiaobao's face as he approached the grand entrance.

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Chapter 226 Magic Forest

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Yin Zhiqiang was a young man of just twenty-three years old. He was among the first batch of ambitious students who began attending Martial Arts School at the age of five. Though he lacked the talent to enter the Royal Art Academy, within a few months of the entrance exam, he successfully rose to the fifth position on the Star Student rankings through his own cultivation efforts.

Yin Zhiqiang's parents were very poor, but his uncle owned a shop and had just enough money to help the young boy train. His uncle saw this as an investment, as the demand for cultivators was high—and he was right.

Currently, Yin Zhiqiang holds the title of top-ranked Star Practitioner. Although he had reached the Practitioner level, he bravely fought through the arduous difficulties of the first bottleneck that every cultivator encounters during their journey, before eventually achieving his breakthrough, as his Qi was slightly below average.

His Qi was so mediocre that it was impossible for Yin Zhiqiang to open his Middle Dantian; however, if he were to consume a large amount of Qi Refining Pills, it might become possible. As for whether he could open his Dantian at all, trying to do so would be futile and unfavorable—like attempting to fuel an engine with dirt. He could never accomplish such a task.

During the first few years working hard in his uncle's store, he trained diligently and appeared nightly as a guard under the moonlight. However, once he entered the student ranks, Ren Zhiqiang joined a mercenary group and ventured repeatedly into the Magic Forest.

At that time, his cultivation level was quite low, and he worked as an errand boy to earn some money. Although his job was considered the least important among the group—which made for the lowest wages—he never let Qi Zhiqiang falter in danger, as no one expected him to participate in battles against Magical Creatures.

After five years of working in the mercenary group, Ren Zhiqiang finally ranked among the last few stars of the Disciple Team, and he now had the possibility of joining the military, which had always been his goal from the beginning.

The Sun Kingdom's Royal Army is a renowned force. Even the lowest-ranking infantry must be cultivators of seven-star level, as their abilities allow them to demand salaries far higher than non-cultivators.

The monthly salary from the Royal Army that Yan Zhiqiang received equaled half a year's income from his uncle's shop. This money alone lifted his entire family out of extreme poverty—and still afforded him the ability to set aside savings for purchasing Qi Boosting Pills.

Just as Yin Zhiqiang was planning to enlist, he came across a recruitment advertisement from the Ma family for guards to bolster security at the Black Market Auction House. While the Royal Army offered slightly higher wages, working at the Black Market Auction House promised greater benefits.

One obvious perk was that he wouldn't have to go to war. Although the Three Kingdoms were currently allied, every year, magical beasts would occasionally leave the Divine Domain in hordes, and the army's job was to ensure the Kingdom's safety by eliminating these creatures. Joining the Ma family ensured that Yin Zhiqiang would not have to participate in such conflicts.

Another benefit was that Yin Zhiqiang wouldn't have to leave home and could stay close to his family and friends. He had always been deeply grateful to his parents and uncle for providing him the opportunity to cultivate, and now he hoped to repay them by ensuring their safety.

A final, significant perk was that every guard in the Ma family was the first to learn about the rumors spreading in the city, and these scattered, often crucial tidbits of information could sometimes fetch a handsome price—they were akin to "ears" that filled one's wallets.

The Ma Family had risen to nobility through their own power, and their family continued to strive aggressively for expansion.

Since the Ma Family was a newly established noble house, ancient lineage and concepts like "honor" held little to no relevance to them; such things were luxuries they couldn't afford. For the Ma Family, the only things that mattered were the practical value of matters and the amount of potential an individual possessed.

No matter the capabilities of the family leader's son, if he fell short compared to any other child—whether the elder's son or another member of the family—the Ma Family collectively appointed the most capable individual from the younger generation as heir without prejudice.

This philosophy extended to how they treated their guards. Anyone who joined the Ma Family was given equal opportunity for promotion. As long as one possessed specific talents or worked exceptionally hard, they could forge a stable and well-paying future for themselves.

Yin Zhiqiang was one of those who carved his path with his own hands. Though his Qi was lackluster, his ranking was still exceptionally high for someone his age, and he had worked his way up from a mere patrol guard to the rear gate sentinel.

As he stood tall, Yin Zhiqiang felt a deep sense of importance, watching many people approach the Black Market Auction House. Whether the auctions were taking place or not, the building was always bustling with merchants eager to sell their goods or buyers looking to retrieve their purchases.

These merchants all knew that the Black Market Auction House was a major faction in Liluo City, with connections in every major city, including the Capital. It was definitely not a place to stir up trouble recklessly, so most of the passing crowds would keep their heads lowered respectfully, and tension was evident whenever someone walked past a guard.

When a subtle sense of self-satisfaction welled up within him, a sly smile spread across Yin Zhiqiang's face. Born in the poorest districts of Liluo City, he had been regarded as trash during his childhood—but now, as a young man, even those he once thought were wealthy would be filled with fear when they saw him.

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This was a thoroughly satisfying feeling of hypocrisy for Yan Zhiqiang. As he gazed down at the street ahead, a smug smile crept onto his face as he sought his next target to intimidate. His eyes soon caught sight of a figure that made him frown slightly.

Midway along the avenue, a person was leisurely walking toward the front entrance. This individual wore a blue outfit that did not seem to be made of the most common material, yet what drew the most attention was the hat.

The hat resembled a conical shape placed atop the head of this unknown figure, shrouding the entire face in darkness and making it impossible to discern anything within.

From the silhouette, this person appeared to be a woman. However, as the figure inched closer, Yin Zhiqiang noticed that despite the pearl-like whiteness of the hands and the narrow waist, the figure lacked an alluring charm—leading the guards to speculate that this could very well be a child.

Yet, as the child drew nearer step by step, Ren Zhiqiang realized that no one dared to approach this enigmatic individual. Whenever someone came close, they immediately retreated. As the stranger bounded within a few paces of the entrance, the two guards felt their entire bodies become unbearably heavy; their limbs turned leaden, their breaths became labored, and sweat rolled down their foreheads and backs.

The oppressive tension was suffocating. The two guards lost complete control of their bodies, feeling as though time around them was collapsing inward. In the instant they fell unconscious, the unknown expert had already covered a distance of over fifty meters and entered the Black Market Auction House before their eyes.

Upon regaining his composure, Yin Zhiqiang briefly closed his eyes and immediately wiped the sweat from his forehead with his sleeve. Despite his efforts, he was certain that he could never see through this enigmatic figure.

From the bright sunlight streaming in through the front entrance, a beam of light spread inside the Black Market Auction House. Although the dim lighting within would typically take Yan Xiaobao a moment to adjust to, everything before him remained crisp and visible, as though nothing had changed for his vision.

What Yan Xiaobao saw was a grand hall filled with stalls. Some of these stalls acquired mundane items such as beast cores, Magic Gems, and Memory Gems from mercenaries for auction purposes later. Others showcased meticulously curated auctions, selling tickets to those wishing to participate.

Yan Xiaobao quickly scanned those ordinary stalls before directing his attention to a section marked with signs reading 'Evaluation,' situated further away from several doors. Yan Xiaobao strode directly toward the appraisal room, and as he crossed the hall, everyone hastily stepped aside, doing their best not to obstruct his path.

Though Yan Xiaobao appeared far superior to these commoners, he couldn't help but sneer inwardly. His smirk was accompanied by Lan Feng's roaring laughter in his mind.

"People have feared me behaving like this for far too long!" Lan Feng exclaimed exuberantly. "I still remember the times when boredom led me to wander through towns, terrorizing everyone."

Hearing such schadenfreude from Phoenix made Yan Xiaobao once again question the ancient bird's mental age. Its mindset certainly seemed no older than that of a thirteen-year-old.

As Yan Xiaobao and Lan Feng wrapped up their indulgent conversation amidst gazes mixing terror and reverence, they arrived at a queue of individuals waiting for their evaluations.

Those queuing for appraisal included several noble stewards, mercenaries, and merchants—individuals who had either acquired treasures during journeys through the Magic Forest or procured rare jewels from unsuspecting sellers.

While all these cultivators possessed cultivation bases far beyond Yan Xiaobao's own, they instinctively stepped aside as soon as they sensed his presence, allowing him to bypass the line due to his status as a Saint.

This display aligned perfectly with Yan Xiaobao's expectations. However, as he neared the door, he noticed someone rushing toward them at high speed.

"Excuse me, um—" the hurried figure tried to speak through gasps as he crossed the hall as quickly as possible. Yet, just as he was about to address him with the word "sir," the attendant abruptly stopped speaking. The mysterious and masked presence before him was simply too ambiguous.

"Please follow me. Our manager has invited you to his office for a private evaluation of your items," the attendant hastily conveyed, hoping fervently that this expert would not hold the slip of tongue against them and develop a poor impression of the esteemed auction house.

Yan Xiaobao nodded lightly at the attendant and followed him, not once glancing back at those who had stepped aside for him. While he offered a silent acknowledgment of their respectful gestures, he was fully aware that their reaction stemmed solely from his suffocating aura. If they knew the truth about his actual cultivation base, their behavior might have been vastly different.

The attendant led him through the hall, up the final staircase to the second floor. The second floor housed two grand rooms, both of which were central to the auctions. Though Yan Xiaobao was curious, he knew that lingering too long on the intricately carved doors, picturesque auction venues, or the reserved seating for higher-ranking nobles would be unbecoming of his role.

Even though he refrained from deeply indulging in the breathtaking sights, Yan Xiaobao earnestly committed the general layout and the formatting of everything they passed along the way to memory. This heightened attentiveness was fueled by the enhanced sensory capabilities granted by the merged aura of Lan Feng and himself.

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"Don't fall in love with my aura," Lan Feng said smugly while surveying everything around him, "I won't let it appear too frequently; it will pose even greater risks to us than the ones we already face. That said, it's quite refreshing to see an expert ranked as a Saint receive such respect."

Lan Feng's words were indeed correct, even if Yan Xiaobao found himself enamored with the sudden surge of power emanating from deep within him; after all, he was fully aware this wasn't his own strength. It was something borrowed, useful for now, but not something he hoped to rely on in the future. Despite Lan Feng's assistance, Yan Xiaobao needed to grow stronger independently. To become an undeniable force, not merely possessing an impressive aura; the gravitational pull of Spiritual Energy's attention wasn't entirely a benefit either.

The attendant guided Yan Xiaobao step by step through the various rooms, leading him further and further until they reached the end of the second floor, where a gentler staircase led up to the third floor. The third floor wasn't decorated with gold and gemstones but was highly practical. Every material was in perfect condition and exuded a sense of high quality and purity; Yan Xiaobao felt this was the most important part of the entire auction house. Once reaching this level, the atmosphere shifted.

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In this new scene, attendants, errand boys, and office staff hurried back and forth, but as soon as they caught sight of Yan Xiaobao and his entourage, they instinctively changed their demeanor as if by habit, retreating to the walls and paying silent respect to the unknown expert.

Yan Xiaobao continued forward, paying no attention to the commotion around him until the attendant stopped before an iron door.

The attendant knocked on the door and opened it himself, allowing Yan Xiaobao to see inside where the manager sat at a wooden desk teeming with scrolls and Memory Stones.

"Please come in," the manager said in his most courteous tone, standing up and jogging lightly toward Yan Xiaobao. This manager was extremely attentive and couldn't help but notice the intense aura surrounding the expert, rippling like waves across a still lake. The manager was a senior member of the Ma Family, a nine-star-ranked expert from Duke University, just one step away from unlocking his advanced Dantian and ascending to King-level.

Although this man only held a Duke ranking, even the King-ranked mayor treated him with great caution and respect. He had previously encountered all the senior experts in Liluo City, but none of them could match the sheer aura that this man once commanded in his prime.

The manager immediately understood that this was someone they could not afford to offend. Initially, he assumed the newcomer was another King-level expert, like those ranking highest in Liluo City, but now it was unmistakable that he was at least an Emperor, if not a Saint.

"I apologize for not welcoming you personally," the manager said, clasping his hands tightly together as he addressed the newcomer, causing the attendant beside him to widen his eyes in astonishment.

This attendant was the manager's personal assistant, who had worked under him for the past few years. Barely seventeen years old, he'd followed the manager's career ever since failing the Royal Academy entrance exam. The attendant came from the Ma family and deeply understood the manager's position and influence, not only within their family but throughout Liluo City. Observing the manager's profound respect for this mysterious stranger filled the attendant's heart with unease.

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Chapter 229 Black Market

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When the attendant was present, Yan Xiaobao refused to answer any questions, so he waved his hand to signal acceptance of the apology. Initially, he planned to respond with a brief reply, but Lan Feng stopped him at the last moment, reminding him that experts in the Holy Name Rankings did not bow to anyone. Instead, he should display a demeanor of acceptance, and that was exactly what Yan Xiaobao did. The manager's face was filled with relief.

"Xiao Wei, please visit the head of the family and inform him that I will be late." As soon as the attendant heard these words, he bowed deeply to the manager, then bowed again to the expert, before exiting the room and shutting the door behind him.

The manager smiled lightly at the expert, his gaze sweeping over everything in front of him, causing his brows to furrow.

The figure before him defied understanding. The robes clearly resembled ceremonial attire, but this expert wore them as though they served purely to conceal. Normally, as experts progressed in their cultivation, their stature would grow more robust and commanding, yet the figure before him remained petite and frail. The narrow waist led the manager to suspect this was a woman, yet there were no signs of breasts! This left the manager thoroughly perplexed.

Beneath the sleeves, the visible hands gleamed like jade, smooth and white. Despite the long and slender fingers, they carried an air of innocence.

The face itself was concealed under a conical hat. Though the manager's curiosity burned to uncover what lay beneath, he was far from foolish enough to ask the expert to remove the hat. If the expert wished to unveil themselves, they would do so willingly. If not, the manager had no intention of stirring discord.

"Ahem," the manager cleared his throat, "I am deeply grateful to have an extraordinary expert like you visit our humble auction house. How may I be of service?" he asked in the most deferential tone.

Yan Xiaobao hesitated briefly, but after a few seconds, he retrieved two Memory Gems from his pocket and placed them on the tabletop. The two Memory Gems remained as black as before, their surfaces polished to a brilliant sheen that seemed pre-burnished. Inside the black gemstones, as they hovered in place, swirls of white mist captivated anyone who dared to gaze into them.

The manager fell silent for a long time. If the Memory Gem contained skills created by experts of lower Dantian rankings, the mist within would be barely visible and dark. If it held skills created by experts of moderate Dantian rankings, the mist would be gray. If it housed skills from top-tier Dantian ranking experts, the mist would be pure white.

This mist was the purest white snow, and the manager could barely contain his urge to salivate.

"This... what are these?" he asked slowly, holding one of the gems in his hand.

"One martial arts skill and one spiritual art skill," Yan Xiaobao replied softly. At just ten years old, Yan Xiaobao's voice was immature, sounding almost feminine, leading the manager to wonder if this truly was a female cultivator.

"Miradi, do you wish for me to auction these two skills?" he asked gently, his gaze fixed on the two stones, unable to tear himself away. Yan Xiaobao smiled faintly, not with mockery but with warmth. Though the manager suspected he was being ridiculed for his reaction to the Memory Gems, Yan Xiaobao was actually amused at being addressed as "Miradi."

"Yes, I wish to auction these two skills. They are contained within low-tier Memory Gems, and I will not auction any other skills," Yan Xiaobao stated slowly, allowing each word to sink into the manager's mind.

Indeed, a low-tier Memory Gem meant its use was limited to just a few times. Furthermore, the enigmatic expert expressed no intention of ever auctioning other Memory Gems containing the same skills, thereby increasing their rarity.

"We will run some tests to determine the nature of the skills, and then proceed with the auction. Would you care to reside in our Ma family's estate until the auction event is ready?" the manager asked, eager to establish a favorable relationship with the mysterious expert. However, Yan Xiaobao shook his head ever so slightly.

"I have matters that require my attention. I wish for the auction to take place one week from now. I will attend the auction, but I must leave on the same day."

Upon hearing this, the manager felt a pang of disappointment but quickly regained his composure and nodded.

"Understood, we will ensure the auction is held one week from today. We will reserve a balcony for you to observe the proceedings. Might I trouble you for your name?" he asked again, striving to glean even a fragment of information about this enigmatic figure. Yan Xiaobao chuckled lightly before replying.

"My name is Li Fen," he said, rising to his feet. "I have a dinner appointment I must honor, so please excuse my departure."

The manager quickly stood as well and opened the heavy iron door with care. He noticed several office staff lingering in the hallway, but as soon as they saw the manager escorting Yan Xiaobao, they dispersed hurriedly. The manager personally guided Yan Xiaobao down the stairs and out of the Black Market Auction House.

After leaving the Black Market Auction House, the number of people trailing him increased significantly. While all these individuals were clearly following Yan Xiaobao, they were attempting to act covertly. Yet their pursuit of him was unabashedly evident.

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These furtive pursuers of spies fully understood and accepted that, despite their attempts to track their target, it was impossible for them to remain unnoticed—especially considering the expert's high level of skill. He seemed to hold no intentions of reacting to their offenses.

As before, Yan Xiaobao returned to the hostel where he had been staying recently. In a rush, he disguised himself in the garb of a commoner and slipped through the back entrance, escaping as casually as any errand boy might.

The boy wore a satisfied smile as he glanced at the crowd waiting outside the hostel. Yan Xiaobao ignored the gathering and turned toward the City Lord's mansion.

As Yan Xiaobao entered the City Lord's mansion, sunlight stretched across the edges of the city walls. Earlier, Yan Xiaobao had been invited to dine with the Rong twins, and he had accepted the invitation; however, on his way to the manor, an abrupt satori struck his currently calm yet bewildered mind.

Yan Xiaobao, dressed in humble clothing, remained nothing more than an obscure child in appearance. Entering the City Lord's mansion was no easy feat—how should he go about it? Fortunately, Rong Xing had planned ahead for this scenario, and as long as the boy looked around ten years old, with striking blue eyes and white hair, a guard's decree would allow him entry.

That evening's dinner passed without complication. Lord Rong Liang and Bu Huang were absent, leaving the three children to chat over the day's gossip.

"I heard Dad talking about something truly amazing!" Rong Ming exclaimed, his eyes gleaming as he devoured a mouthful of stew.

"An expert has appeared in town!" Rong Ming paused as he looked at Yan Xiaobao and Rong Xing, anticipating a shocked reaction. "This person is even stronger than our esteemed father, and apparently, they're auctioning something at the Black Market Auction House next week! Dad was so excited—he mentioned it to Bu Huang, and they forgot to shut the door."

Rong Xing chuckled as she watched her excited brother, while Yan Xiaobao performed an exaggerated display, gasping dramatically and widening his eyes. The rest of the evening revolved around Yan Xiaobao asking several questions about this expert and how Lord Rong Liang might soon glean such information.

It turned out that the first envoy responsible for bringing him back from the market selling Memory Gems belonged to the Rong Family.

Night fell, and the final rays of sunlight painted the sky in shades of violet. As they returned to the Royal Art Academy, the three children gathered together, none detecting the shadow that had been tailing the carriage throughout the journey.

Upon reaching the foot of the mountain, the carriage had to turn back. Only students or individuals carrying badges from the Royal Academy could enter the mountain grounds. Meanwhile, the shadowy figure lurking behind them deftly bypassed the protection mechanisms, blending seamlessly into the night's haunting gloom.

When the trio arrived at the residential area, Yan Xiaobao and the Rong twins each took separate paths to their individual homes atop the mountain, leaving behind the young boy to walk the final stretch alone. Within the shared spirit between boy and bird, a growing sense of satisfaction and confidence blossomed.

The day had exceeded all expectations. They had managed to purchase two Memory Gems, sell their skills at a high price, and roam the town to draw attention; the intrigue and allure they cultivated skyrocketed. Ultimately, they safely returned without blowing their cover. Today was unquestionably a day of triumph for Yan Xiaobao and Lan Feng, who felt deeply satisfied with their accomplishments.

The pair soon entered their homes, eager to rest for the night. However, as they busied themselves inside, the shadow perched upon the neighboring courtyard roof remained in view.

The sky turned as black as ink, yet despite the dark curtain that veiled the heavens, the luminous moon illuminated the warm night. Beneath the moonlight, a figure cloaked in shadows observed the children moving within the adjacent house.

A vicious, resonant smile crept across the stranger's face as two tawny eyes gleamed with a latent, forceful energy. Even as the lights within the neighboring house slowly dimmed one by one, the cloaked figure lingered for much of the night, hesitating as they stared at the room where the children slept.

"Soon, little master," she murmured at last as the first rays of dawn streaked across the sky. Enveloped in retreating shadows, she maneuvered to blend seamlessly into the twilight's fading veil.

When the woman vanished into the quiet depths of night, Xu Yue awoke at the break of dawn, feeling more rested than he had in ages.

He spent the early hours in the courtyard, his focus on gardening. As the day unfolded, it soon became one among many for those roaming the grounds.

Yan Xiaobao and Wang Julong attended the Sun Kingdom's historical cultivation courses, though these sessions had evidently transformed into open battlegrounds of rivalry among the new generation of prodigies.

The two boys did their best to keep their distance from one another yet found immense satisfaction in casting unnoticed, contemptuous glances in each other's direction.

"You better not mention my behavior again," Lan Feng replied with a laugh, each word dripping with self-satisfied mirth. "You absolutely wouldn't act like someone your age does—especially since you weren't strong enough to beat him the last time."

The cursed bird's words echoed the essence of Yan Xiaobao's hometown. Though he was fully aware that he was now past thirty years old, he could hardly suppress his childish impulses and continued

engaging in his feud with Wang Julong. The young master possessed an ability to provoke Yan Xiaobao, a skill he'd been honing since birth.

At least their rivalry didn't interfere with the lessons, but that wasn't because either student genuinely cared for them. Instead, they used the lessons to further their own agendas. Wang Julong spent each class doing precisely that from day one, while Yan Xiaobao occasionally asked probing questions about the Dark Era.

Unfortunately, their instructor, Li Yuan, refused to address any inquiries about the Dark Era, claiming his abilities were insufficient to secure such knowledge. If Yan Xiaobao was truly interested, he would have to grow far stronger.

Frustrated by this response, the white-haired boy pursed his lips in irritation before heading to the library for his own search for answers.

What he discovered was that every book, scroll, or Memory Stone tied to the Dark Era had been destroyed. This destruction resulted in the loss of vast martial arts techniques, spiritual arts, and even cultivation methods.

After the first class ended, Yan Xiaobao spent the remaining lectures combing through the library's neglected archives, quickly skimming through whatever he could. Finally, after three days of relentless searching, he struck lucky.

Yan Xiaobao unearthed a book crafted near the end of the Dark Era. It was hidden in one of the library's darkest corners.

The book was old and dust-ridden, with pages partially singed and worn. Yet, some passages remained legible, and Yan Xiaobao immediately sensed that the book harbored a secret.

"Behind the Dark Era lies a great sin

A sin so immense that darkness rose victorious

The sin embedded itself deep into our souls' cores

Darkness achieved its purpose, achieving its end.

Heroes were born into this enslaved life

Heroes of rebellion became free

Yet, as rebellion surged, blood fell like rain

The darkness washed away, granting us liberty

Nations reborn lay in ruin

But even now, freedom remains what we pursue'

This scripture was etched in the worn book. As he read each word, Yan Xiaobao felt his body quiver, and Lan Feng—upon seeing the passage—was equally shaken.

The world painted in these verses differed starkly from the one Lan Feng had described to Yan Xiaobao before. Yan Xiaobao realized that the great sin associated with the Dark Era was far more intricate than he had originally assumed.

Lan Feng's soul visibly reeled in shock, unable to comprehend why anyone would depict his world as a form of slavery. This revelation deepened Yan Xiaobao's conviction that Lan Feng himself wasn't concealing the truth from him.

Lan Feng was a domineering beast. He would kill anyone who blocked his path without hesitation or mercy, employing violence if necessary to claim what he desired. Unless benefiting from it directly, he was void of compassion.

Still, despite his arrogance, Lan Feng was unfailingly loyal to those under his protection. He wouldn't trouble his own people, which, from Yan Xiaobao's perspective, seemed to hold true for other heirs as well.

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