

Medical 421

Chapter 421 Spiritual Art_2

Seeing the nod, and how they no longer looked at Wang Julong, Yan Xiaobao released a tranquil cloud, quickly suppressing the killing intent and locking it in his Dantian Cave.

Quickly glancing at his chest, Yan Xiaobao urged some of his Qi to enter his meridians, circulating through his body, stopping the bleeding, and working hard to close the wound. Looking at the injury, the green pearl had no interest in assisting Yan Xiaobao in healing it, so Yan Xiaobao sighed and once again faced his opponent.

"Next, please," he said, his voice polite and friendly, yet the words sounded mocking to all who heard them, anger surging in their eyes, their hearts bleeding with hatred.

"Don't overstep yourself," another voice sounded from behind the group in front of him, "you're nothing more than a Master-level cultivator, do you think you can be cocky in front of us?" he asked as he walked forward.

Yan Xiaobao looked at the man. He was neither tall nor short, neither fat nor thin. He was older than anyone Yan Xiaobao had seen today, but he was still just a middle-aged man.

Judging by how the others treated him, it was clear that this man was the leader of the group, and as he looked at the Master appearing before him, a smile finally appeared on his face.

The man standing in front of Yan Xiaobao was neither tall nor short. He was neither fat nor thin. He was not old, nor was he young. He was the most ordinary person Yan Xiaobao had ever seen, yet despite his mediocrity, he was still the leader of the mercenary group and a Master-level cultivator.

Just these two facts were enough for Yan Xiaobao to focus on this man, but no matter how confused Yan Xiaobao looked, he grew even more bewildered, because this man didn't seem as dangerous as before.

Standing on the stage, Yan Xiaobao felt as if something was wrong with his opponent, yet he didn't realize how to make the first move, thus Yan Xiaobao stood there, still unwilling to make the first move.

The man's movements were faster than Yan Xiaobao anticipated, and not only faster, but his attack targeted Yan Xiaobao's waist directly instead of any weak point. This attack completely took Yan Xiaobao by surprise, and before he noticed, he saw the entire arena fly before his eyes as he was violently thrown to the ground.

Being thrown like this was something Yan Xiaobao had never experienced before, and for this reason, his reaction was a bit slow.

What happened was, his opponent wrapped his arm around the weaker boy's waist and then slammed him violently onto the stage, attempting to break the young boy's neck.

Noticing this was the intent, Yan Xiaobao merged with the earth, turning the entire stage from hard ground into soft sand, reducing his injuries upon landing.

Although Yan Xiaobao did this, he still felt immense pain in his shoulder and immediately realized it was dislocated.

After throwing Yan Xiaobao to the ground, the middle-aged man immediately seized the opportunity to launch a series of attacks. All of which were punches and kicks, falling onto Yan Xiaobao, causing the small boy to cough up blood from internal injuries.

All this happened in a moment of chaos, and now Yan Xiaobao was severely injured. Every wound engaged in an intense struggle within his Dantian Cave, the red mist stronger than before, hoping to emerge.

"One. Two. Three. Four." Hui Yue began counting as he lay on the ground, but before Yan Xiaobao stood up again, he didn't go past four. He carefully wiped away the fresh blood seeping from the corners of his mouth.

Standing up, Yan Xiaobao could only blame himself, unable to help but mock how bad he looked. His entire plan of revealing himself to shock the Dragon Army, yet here he was, beaten by some mediocre mercenaries.

Hui Yue was seriously annoyed, raising his arm, as flames started to appear. Many small flames joined into one large flame. The heat radiating from the flame was so intense that both people and Master felt as if they were being scorched, even if they weren't in direct contact with the flame itself.

Yan Xiaobao's flames had varying degrees of power, with the Blue Flame being his absolute most intense flame. To create the Blue Flame, Yan Xiaobao needed Lan Feng's assistance; it was a flame that burned anything. Even a dragon's flame couldn't compare to the Phoenix's Blue Flame.

The flame currently in use wasn't so severe. Instead, it was a red flame, as ordinary as possible, but even the most brilliant of Yan Xiaobao's flames was bad news for others.

Seeing the flame, the man cursed slightly, emitting a silver light from his body. Wrapping himself with a protective spirit guardian, exuding a light hue.

More silver light appeared with a spell in his hands, but unlike Yan Xiaobao, this silver light wasn't used to support an elemental affinity. Instead, it burst forth, forming a massive hand, with energy resting solely in Yan Xiaobao's hand!

Yan Xiaobao saw a spiritual art that didn't rely on elemental energy. Before his five-year-old child came back, he had seen it implemented once, when Lord Liang Rong first arrived at the village Yan Xiaobao grew up in, subduing magical beasts with an illusion.

Seeing others specializing in non-elemental spiritual arts, Yan Xiaobao was quite surprised, his interest piqued, as he fed more spiritual energy into his flame. Making it so pure that the red flame turned to orange, almost yellow, soaring upwards to the sky.

Looking at the large silver palms, Yan Xiaobao consolidated the flames with both hands, preventing it from continuing to intimidate. Instead, he turned all the flames into a gigantic fireball, an ever-growing sphere. The intense heat was enough to scorch Yan Xiaobao's clothes from a distance. The stage floor was singed, and the heat emitted made it difficult for the audience to breathe evenly without feeling constricted.

As the large palm fell beside him, Yan Xiaobao released the fireball. The two forces met with a massive explosion and burst of power. The explosion was so loud that all the spectators were pushed back in

their seats, even Yan Xiaobao and his middle-aged opponent staggered back, blood spraying from their mouths.

Wiping away the blood once more, Yan Xiaobao glared at the man, both of them edging closer to each other, prepared to go again.

This situation differed greatly from their first exchange, as Yan Xiaobao now knew his opponent was a master of grappling and throwing, but Yan Xiaobao had practiced with his dagger for years, thinking of Black Blood and the Qi dagger. He lunged forward.

A hand shot towards Yan Xiaobao, but he managed to narrowly dodge it. Had he not dodged, he would have been tightly held like before, but his preparation helped, and instead, he managed to twist his body to escape.

After activating Velocity Flow, his speed was much quicker than before, with a twist of his body, Hui Yue managed to slip past the charging middle-aged man, placing a dagger at his throat.

Both Yan Xiaobao and the man neared their capability limits. Yan Xiaobao because of his severe injuries, and the man because he had poured all his spiritual energy into the previous palm attack, leaving him regretfully sighing as the black cold iron pointed at his throat.

Seeing Yan Xiaobao holding his dagger against his opponent's throat, everyone felt like they were witnessing a repeat of a previous battle, and they were correct, as Yan Xiaobao used his last spiritual energy to merge with the earth once more, slowly lowering his opponent, allowing him to leave the stage.

Moving him gently, neither of them struggled as usual. Both were very aware of who the winner was.

The middle-aged man placed on the ground saluted Yan Xiaobao and then bowed in salute. "Thank you for not killing any of my people," he said with gratitude on his face.

Yan Xiaobao nodded at him before cursing the green pearl in his heart. Due to internal bleeding, his body was in a severe state, not to mention his forcibly relocated dislocated shoulder.

"This mysterious group that keeps surprising us seems to head into the finals tomorrow," the host said, surprised by the outcome, "they won the semifinal 3 to 0, and the finals will be held at noon tomorrow. Be sure to attend!"

Hearing his words, Yan Xiaobao nodded at the host before leaving the stage. As his feet touched the ground, Wang Julong appeared with green energy swirling in her hands, as she slowly began healing many of Hui Yue's injuries.

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Chapter 422 Full Recovery

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When she pushed the cultivation base to its limit, her face was covered in sweat. At first, it was extremely difficult for her to heal him because the internal injuries were far worse than she expected. However, after blending her spiritual energy with her body's elemental affinity, she noticed that it became much easier to heal him. An energy burst forth from the Dantian Cave, and as the green pearl's energy devoured Wang Julong's spiritual energy to heal the white-haired boy's entire body, both Wang Julong and Yan Xiaobao appeared equally stunned.

Wang Julong had no idea what this phenomenon was. Yet, Yan Xiaobao seemed to sigh deeply, as the green pearl had finally been activated. It absorbed the spiritual energy that Wang Julong poured into healing his wounds. It felt as though the green healing pearl was a greedy and selfish item, with hardly any true connection to the act of healing.

Now, the healing pearl began to spin, quickly healing every injury on Yan Xiaobao's body. By the time he was set to begin three rounds of combat, he was free of wounds, though not even for a moment had he been whole before this.

At the moment when her foreign spiritual energy entered his body, the previously dormant pearl suddenly awoke. The moment the pearl exhibited its greed suddenly imprinted itself in Yan Xiaobao's mind—a greed and yearning to steal energy. Without any action from Yan Xiaobao, the green pearl fiercely lashed out at the energy, forcibly siphoning some of it from Wang Julong's spiritual energy sea. Fortunately, it did not exhaust her entire cultivation base, only draining the current spiritual energy pool.

Once the green pearl consumed about two-thirds of the energy, it finally stopped spinning. Every wound inside Yan Xiaobao's body had been healed—at the cost of Wang Julong's spiritual energy being completely depleted.

Everything transpired within minutes, right in the middle of the arena, leaving everyone present stunned. Their shock was plain on their faces. Even masked cultivators were visibly shaken beneath their masks.

Healing was revered by everyone, and nearly every mercenary group had members with wood elemental affinity to aid in treating injuries sustained in the tunnels. However, regardless of how strong a healer might be, the degree and speed at which they could heal were always limited.

Everyone noticed that Yan Xiaobao had recovered completely within mere minutes. The cloaked healer beside him hadn't seemed to expend most of her energy.

A few misunderstandings existed about these theories. However, Yan Xiaobao wasn't someone who sought to correct their assumptions. Instead, he gathered his team and slowly walked back to the courtyard they had borrowed from Xu Biao.

The misunderstanding was that even though Wang Julong appeared fine, she was utterly drained—her entire energy consumed and expelled by the green pearl.

Additionally, even though the pearl had devoured a significant amount of spiritual energy, it was able to heal his injuries in an instant, thanks to the spiritual energy enriched with her wood element affinity.

Though Yan Xiaobao donned his cloak, four cloaked figures loyally followed him as they returned to train.

The following day was set to be the most critical one since they had entered the Demon Residence Cave. It was time to prove they were indeed the town's most powerful mercenary group.

As soon as Yan Xiaobao returned to the courtyard, he sat down to cultivate and reflect on how broken his body had been.

Now that he was settled, Yan Xiaobao recalled how his internal organs had been severely damaged. The only reason he hadn't died from the initial blow was that he had previously used Qi to fortify each organ.

Knowing this had saved him, Yan Xiaobao understood the importance of constantly strengthening his body. The green pearl inside him was temperamental and selfish—it was not something he could rely on. As such, he needed to protect his life at all costs. Tasks such as body reinforcement were simple but would slow down his cultivation progress.

After a while, he noticed that Lan Feng had remained silent, leaving the decision to Yan Xiaobao. The white-haired boy finally decided to spend extra time fortifying his body. After all, if he were to die from being tossed aside, what use was a high cultivation base?

The Qi that Yan Xiaobao had previously infused into his blood, organs, and flesh had permeated fully, transforming into the essence of heaven and earth. To restart the process of strengthening these areas would take considerable time, but if it could save his life, it was worth it.

Hui Yue did not open his eyes but began cultivating. He refined the essence's quintessence into Qi and Spirit, forming dual cultivation technique clones within his Dantian. Slowly, he directed strand after strand of Qi back into the body, guiding it through the Chongmai Meridian and into the organs, blood, muscles, and bones, forging a body that was far sturdier than before.

In the past, when Yan Xiaobao was younger, he focused on one organ at a time, feeding it until it could no longer take more. But now Yan Xiaobao understood that evenly fortifying the entire body was far more crucial.

Sitting beneath a large tree in the courtyard, Yan Xiaobao dedicated his full attention to strengthening his body.

Not only did Hui Yue go straight into meditation, but Wang Julong did the same, hastily meditating to replenish her spiritual energy in preparation for the fight the next day.

Deng Wu sat in his room, inscribing various formations—some were Fireballs, while others were tsunamis. All of them depended on the small drops of spiritual essence he had collected from Yan Xiaobao and Wang Julong's elemental affinity.

Chapter 423 Complete Recovery_2

He also forged small flowers, similar to the Poison Domain created by Wang Julong's poppy flowers. Even the Earthen Spears were formed from Yan Xiaobao's spiritual essence.

This is the power of inscriptions. With the right materials and resources, anything can be created. The strength of this attack was roughly half the intensity of an attack cultivated by someone with elemental affinity, but it made up for the lack of force with versatility.

Being an inscriber, he heavily relied on preparation before any battle. While he had some abilities that could be utilized in combat, they were weaker than his inscriptions and couldn't sustain his survival long-term.

Yan Xiaobao placed all his memory stones onto a belt that he had purchased at a high cost, feeling as though he carried an abundance of storage stones. However, when compared to Deng Wu, this was insignificant.

Deng Wu's earrings were crafted from polished blue storage stones. His rings were made from storage stones. His necklace, too, was forged from storage stones. Even his robes, belt, and gloves were adorned with polished gemstones, each embedded with multiple memory stones. To say Deng Wu had a pile of storage stones would not be an exaggeration.

Despite owning so many storage stones, Deng Wu was perfectly aware of which items were stored in which stone and whether one storage stone was nested inside another.

Xu Yue had long since given up trying to comprehend the extent of Deng Wu's power. Instead, whenever requested, he simply provided spiritual energy that seemed to diminish each time.

Deng Wu was a necromancer, but necromancy wasn't his only source of strength. It was much like Wang Julong splitting her cultivation between healing and offensive arts.

After finishing the last few inscriptions, Deng Wu stowed them in specific storage stones. Then, he retrieved three other stones, withdrawing beast cores and magical crystals, organizing them by size as he went.

Metal affinity specialists could refine internal energies within beast cores to amplify the damage caused by their inscriptions, utilizing this energy to enhance their attacks significantly.

Beast cores and gemstones also served other purposes, but for Deng Wu, their most crucial function was augmenting his inscriptions, as it could save his life as well as his friends' lives.

While Deng Wu was preparing for battle, Sha Yun sat beside Yan Xiaobao in meditation. Her lower body had completely transformed into stone, while the human part remained untouched. Her brows furrowed deeply as she exerted herself, dripping with sweat while striving to achieve a higher level of fusion with the earth.

Xie Lan surveyed her newly assembled group, noting how every member dove into cultivation the moment they entered the courtyard, giving her an odd feeling.

No cheering, no celebration—just an eerie calm, as though they had never won the semifinals of the Mercenary Tournament, where most others would have been overjoyed.

Xie Lan wasn't just surprised by their behavior; she marveled at Wang Julong's efficiency in healing Yan Xiaobao. The longer she spent time with this group, the more awestruck she became by their abilities.

The man Hui Yue had always opposed—well-known in the mercenary world—possessed near-impossible survival skills in close combat. Yet here stood Yan Xiaobao, a young man who appeared somewhat frail, but had emerged from the deadliest combinations unscathed.

Surviving torment and simultaneously claiming victory proved Yan Xiaobao had resilience far greater than his appearance suggested. However, a tough physique alone wasn't sufficient. It was evident he had sustained serious injuries, but after Wang Julong released spiritual energy infused with the wood element, all those wounds vanished.

Xu Biao already knew where this group of four had originated, yet he withheld the information from Xie Lan, leaving her to wonder whether these four surpassed ordinary Master-level cultivators entirely. If that were true, Yan Xiaobao had every reason to trust in his strength.

Xie Lan took one last glance at the young cultivators behind her before slowly exiting the courtyard, heading toward Xu Biao's office to relay the day's events, including handing over a storage stone that documented her memory of the entire battle.

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Yan Xiaobao had been meditating for some time when he suddenly sensed subtle shifts in the environment around him. Shocked, he opened his eyes, only to find the host of the Mercenary Tournament mere inches away from him.

Recoiling backward instinctively, Yan Xiaobao's eyes widened as blue flames ignited in his hands. A sudden sense of danger and helplessness overwhelmed his senses. Trusting his intuition, Yan Xiaobao summoned the affinity he shared with Lan Feng, creating a fire far more destructive than anything he'd ever summoned.

Upon seeing the blue flames, a flicker of surprise appeared in the smiling host's eyes, though he showed no signs of moving.

"I apologize for startling you, child," the man finally spoke, his voice tinged with laughter. Yan Xiaobao squinted, his blue flame steadfastly burning in his hand.

"Relax, I don't intend you any harm," the man said further, his face lit by a broad grin, the corners of his eyes crinkled in genuine amusement. "Besides, if I wanted you dead, you would already be dead."

Recognizing the truth in the man's words, Yan Xiaobao slowly extinguished the blue flames in his hand and motioned that they should move elsewhere, so as not to disturb Sha Yun's focus.

As they moved to a quieter area, Yan Xiaobao couldn't help but notice the host's eyes briefly rest on the Dragon Army insignia on his chest.

When the host saw this, he smirked knowingly but said nothing further until after they sat.

"I am Zhou Long, captain of all Dragon Clan members in this Demon Residence Cave," he introduced himself, prompting Yan Xiaobao to nod in response, "Yan Xiaobao," he replied.

"Have you ever wondered why this place is called the Demon Residence Cave?" Zhou Long asked with curiosity, a faint smile gracing his lips. Yan Xiaobao frowned as he pondered the name but ultimately shook his head. The name suggested a powerful Demon Beast lurking within the cave, but it wasn't something he had actively considered before.

"Good, very good," Zhou Long said with a smile. "Long ago, a Demon Beast was discovered in this cave. For years, we dared not establish any strongholds, as the Demon Beast could annihilate everything we built in an instant. Unfortunately, we had too many citizens, and within a few years, we were forced to inhabit every underground cave available."

Zhou Long shot Yan Xiaobao a long, enigmatic glance before continuing, "You understand this, of course," he said, "as it's standard knowledge for everyone within the caves." Yan Xiaobao laughed quietly, neither affirming nor refuting the statement.

"In any case, it's been centuries since we decided to live in the caves, and the Demon Beast has yet to reappear," Zhou Long sighed deeply as he gazed skyward. "The beast has slumbered for a millennium. If it wakes now, it will be at its weakest."

"I'm seeking powerful mercenaries and Dragon Clan members to join in slaying the beast. Those who participate and survive will earn remarkable credits within the Dragon Army Corps. If you're interested in joining us, you might even receive a recommendation letter for Dragon Corps headquarters."

Yan Xiaobao cast a sharp glare at the man, wondering just how much he truly knew. However, his scowl was answered only with a calm smile and serene, confident eyes.

The man stood from his seat and began to walk away, yet suddenly stopped. Turning back to Yan Xiaobao, he said, "If you survive tomorrow, come find me. I'll share more information with you."

With that, Zhou Long quietly departed from the courtyard, leaving a bewildered Yan Xiaobao behind.

Yan Xiaobao squinted at the courtyard gate where Zhou Long had vanished. The circumstances too conveniently aligned. Xu Biao knew Yan Xiaobao was investigating knowledge about the Dragon Army, and now here appeared Zhou Long, the captain of the entire Dragon Army within the Demon Residence Cave, preparing to hire Yan Xiaobao and his companions for a pivotal mission that promised all the credibility he needed—not only for entering the next tunnel but for access to every corridor within the middle cavern.

Yan Xiaobao narrowed his eyes, sensing that something didn't quite add up. At the same time, it was a rare opportunity. Ultimately, it boiled down to how well they could prepare in advance.

Following Zhou Long's visit, Yan Xiaobao couldn't regain his calm. No matter how much he dwelled on the matter, the pieces simply didn't fit. It was as though everything was proceeding too smoothly—something that had never happened without external forces manipulating the scene.

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Chapter 424 Demon Battle

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As he weighed the pros and cons of the battle with the residential demon, Yan Xiaobao's ice-blue eyes were filled with doubt. It had been resting for thousands of years, if not longer, and it was clear it would be significantly weakened upon awakening. But how did they know it would wake soon?

Why had the captain of the Dragon Clan Team personally invited Yan Xiaobao and his group of friends before the tournament final began? He was deliberating whether Zhou Long should accept the proposal, with countless questions swirling in his mind.

While considering his decision, Yan Xiaobao noticed Xie Lan had returned. It was easy to discern where she had been, and a thought formed in Yan Xiaobao's heart. However, it was immensely risky, so he decided to discuss the plan with others first. Since it was highly likely to be a trap, he felt they deserved a say.

Meanwhile, Yan Xiaobao couldn't help but question whether he was overthinking things. While it seemed coincidental, he couldn't fathom any way the Dragon Army would have known about their actions in the tunnel earlier. Thus, he gradually calmed down.

Standing up, Yan Xiaobao patted Sha Yun's head, waking her from her training. Initially, her face showed a hint of annoyance, but it quickly turned to a smile as she saw it was Yan Xiaobao who had stirred her from her trance.

Seeing Yan Xiaobao interrupt her training, Sha Yun knew he had something important to discuss with them. She sprinted into the house, gathering Wang Julong and Deng Wu, bringing them to where Hui Yue was outside.

No one invited Xie Lan—this was a decision the four of them had to make. At first, Yan Xiaobao quickly laid out what had happened. His narration was swift and precise, highlighting his concerns while also underscoring the allure of the endeavor.

Looking at one another, his friends smiled faintly. Deng Wu opened his mouth and teased, "You said it was dangerous, but haven't you already decided against it?" He chuckled, as Sha Yun and Wang Julong nodded, grinning as well.

"No matter what dangers we face, I'll follow you!" Sha Yun added, proudly thrusting her chest forward, seemingly quite pleased with herself. Her gaze was so full of reassurance that Yan Xiaobao couldn't help but laugh heartily.

Wang Julong didn't say anything but revealed a faint smile, her eyes alight with an excited glimmer. She loved a life of adventure—how could she resist such an enticing proposal?

Seeing the faces of his friends, their determination, and the excitement shining through, Yan Xiaobao felt deeply gratified. He was fortunate to have friends who were willing to face peril with him—true friends who knew that, despite their lives being at stake, they would always have each other's backs.

In his musings, Yan Xiaobao stood up and let out a sharp whistle, catching Xie Lan's attention as she meditated on the other side of the courtyard. The piercing sound startled her awake, and she saw Yan Xiaobao watching her. She also noticed his beckoning gesture, calling her to join them.

Xie Lan furrowed her brows but obeyed regardless, wondering why she was suddenly being invited to their group discussion. After all, when it came down to it, Xie Lan was still an outsider. She worked for Xu Biao, not Yan Xiaobao. In truth, she held no loyal ties to Yan Xiaobao; everything she did was merely fulfilling orders to assist them in the tournament.

"I need you to fetch Xu Biao," Yan Xiaobao said as soon as she was within earshot. A flash of anger flickered in Xie Lan's eyes. Xu Biao wasn't someone who could simply be summoned at whim. He was the Guild Master of the Mercenary Guild, not some errand boy running around as others pleased.

Observing Xie Lan, Yan Xiaobao quickly noticed her hesitation and sighed heavily, reminded once again of how much this expert under the King resembled Sha Yun.

"Don't worry," Yan Xiaobao continued, assuring her, "He'll feel this trip is worthwhile." He made it clear that he wasn't calling upon the Guild Master for some trivial task.

Though Yan Xiaobao reassured her of the importance, Xie Lan still felt it was presumptuous to summon Xu Biao. Nevertheless, she dared not disobey the request, knowing how highly Xu Biao regarded Yan Xiaobao.

Donning her black cloak, Xie Lan left the courtyard and walked once again toward the Mercenary Guild's office, grumbling the entire way.

"Did you summon me?" Xu Biao said in a playful tone as he appeared at the entrance of the courtyard, his eyes sparkling with unhidden curiosity and a smile lingering on his lips.

Seeing how swiftly Xu Biao arrived, Yan Xiaobao's face broke into a small smile. He gestured for Xu Biao to hurry over and follow him.

"Zhou Long came to visit," Yan Xiaobao said in a casual tone. "He's invited us to capture a Great Demon. Perhaps you're familiar with this?"

Each word Yan Xiaobao uttered brought great surprise to Xu Biao's face. After a while, his expression shifted from astonishment to slight confusion to realization.

"I see!" Xu Biao exclaimed, his face breaking into a radiant smile. "So that explains why Old Zhou decided to serve as the referee for this year's tournament!"

Studying Yan Xiaobao, Xu Biao pondered for a moment, wondering why he'd been brought into the meeting. It seemed as if Yan Xiaobao was testing him.

Xu Biao wasn't wrong. Over the last few minutes, Yan Xiaobao had been closely watching Xu Biao's every expression and reaction. If this turned out to be a trap, then it was clear Xu Biao would be part of it as well. However, his current expressions appeared completely genuine. Either he was an impeccable liar, or he genuinely hadn't known about this before.

Chapter 425 Demon Battle_2

"Why don't you join us?" Yan Xiaobao suddenly said. Although he trusted Xu Biao a little, he also felt it was better to keep him close. If he saw Xu Biao and Zhou Long working together closely, then they would have an opportunity to escape quickly.

Seeing the surprised expression on Xu Biao's face, Yan Xiaobao almost burst into laughter. However, his expression quickly transformed into happiness,

"I'd like to join," he said, looking as excited as a child about to open their Christmas presents. This expression formed a stark contrast to Xu Biao's usual demeanor, and even Xie Lan was startled by his eagerness to join.

"You're very welcome to join my group after the tournament is over," Yan Xiaobao said. His tone showed he had no doubts about who would win the next day and somehow revealed to Xu Biao that even greater secrets awaited discovery.

So far, Yan Xiaobao had been striving hard to keep his opponents alive. It was far harder to defeat someone without killing them than it was to use all one's strength to kill. This was one of the reasons for their struggles thus far, yet Yan Xiaobao felt the masked man's aura was extremely dangerous. His attitude shifted from "keeping them alive" to "killing with his gaze," letting their skills decide whether they would survive or not.

The final battle was unlike the other two tournaments Yan Xiaobao had participated in thus far. On the contrary, it was a three-team battle, where all three teams had to fight against each other, and only one could remain on stage to be declared the winner.

Such battles were the bloodiest and most sought-after spectacles in the arena. This was also the reason why nine teams participated in the championship instead of merely eight.

The other two groups, the lowest-ranked mercenaries and the mid-ranked mercenaries, both wrapped up their matches on the same day. But none of their battles attracted as much attention as the finals fought by the black-cloaked group.

"Alright, I'd be happy to join your ranks," Xu Biao said awkwardly, "But you are cultivators, and you're about to enter the finals of our annual championship."

"While you may feel safe and secure now, never forget that you are cultivators. You are Martial Artists, and Martial Artists always know that death looms ever so close. You might die today, or you might die tomorrow, but one thing is certain: the odds of dying of old age are very small."

"Even if you possess things that might help you survive, they can never guarantee success. However, if you are still alive tomorrow — even if not all of you — then I'd like to join forces with you to kill the demon beast residing here."

Hearing Xu Biao's solemn words, Yan Xiaobao revealed a bitter smile. He was fully aware of the dangers brought by his new way of life, but it was precisely because of this that he sought greater challenges to

improve himself. If he wasn't strong enough to protect himself and his friends, how could he ever hope to defeat the experts he and Lan Feng were searching for?

"Then we'll meet you tomorrow," Yan Xiaobao said with a smile, his face utterly calm. He politely bowed to Hui Yue and Xu Biao before resuming his meditation.

Seeing Yan Xiaobao meditating, Deng Wu, Sha Yun, and Wang Julong all bowed respectfully before following his example.

Witnessing this, Xie Lan's face was filled with displeasure. Although she knew Yan Xiaobao was not someone to be underestimated, Xu Biao was still the Guild Master and deserved more respect than what these young people showed.

What further frustrated her was that Xu Biao showed no signs of dissatisfaction with such casual treatment! He was a respected figure and typically one of the most important people in the city. Now, his words ranked beneath Zhou Long's. For him to treat these youngsters with such respect and interest, Xie Lan couldn't help but feel there were hidden aspects to the situation she was unaware of. She dared not ask any questions or comment on their behavior.

Finally, Xie Lan led Xu Biao back to his office. After bowing deeply, she returned to the courtyard to find none of the young people had made a single move.

She observed them for a while before entering her room. Despite not liking Yan Xiaobao and his team, she was ordered to assist them in participating in the tournament and had no intention of neglecting her duties. This prompted her to begin meditating, balancing her pressures to prepare for the upcoming battle.

As the sun rose steadily, Yan Xiaobao couldn't help but think of the woman most likely to be playing with five children, just as she did every day of her life for the past millennia.

It was early morning, and while the city was usually asleep, nothing was as it seemed this time. Normally bustling with bakers and message boys, the streets were now crowded with citizens and mercenaries, wandering to their desired destinations to buy sweets or savory bread. Some purchased medicines or medicinal herbs to aid their efforts in the finals, while others spent their winnings on armor or weapons.

Hui Yue emerged from the courtyard once more, dressed in a black cloak. This time, it wasn't for concealment but for protection, as the cloak absorbed all attacks due to the nullification inscriptions engraved on it.

Despite the bustling activity on the streets, people stepped aside to grant Yan Xiaobao and his companions space, as they all knew who they were. Seed Tournament finalists! If anyone in this city deserved respect, it was those who made it to the finals of the Seed Tournament.

As they wandered around, Yan Xiaobao came across a weapon stall and stopped, recalling his prior decision to buy something for his friends. He paused briefly when he noticed that the weapons were crafted from extraordinary materials.

Seeing Yan Xiaobao stop there, the others followed suit, all gazing at the various weapons on display.

Most of the weapons were crafted from black iron, like black blood, and all were engraved with inscriptions to enhance their durability and sharpness. Displayed were swords, daggers, staves, and halberds. The most exquisite weapons were showcased, while the less flashy ones were grouped together with cheaper items.

Surveying so many weapons, Yan Xiaobao decided it was time for each of them to find a weapon that could aid them in their journey.

"Each of you, pick a weapon from here. The Guild Master is right; we never know when death may catch up with us, so arm yourselves to prepare for today's battle."

Upon hearing Yan Xiaobao's words, joy lit up their faces as they began sifting through the displayed weapons.

Deng Wu opted for a sword crafted from black iron. Its size matched that of an ordinary sword, but its sharpness far exceeded the finest swords he could have ever imagined.

Sha Yun chose the largest halberd she could find. It stood 2 meters tall, with edges measuring 0.5 meters. Its sheer size clearly demonstrated it wasn't a weapon to be trifled with, and in the Snake Woman's hands, the halberd would truly unleash its full power.

The halberd was made of black iron, like Yan Xiaobao's dagger and Deng Wu's sword. It was reinforced with inscriptions and embedded with two small Magic Gems where the shaft connected to the blade.

The person who spent the most time choosing was Wang Julong. She examined every weapon displayed, but none seemed suitable for her. Finally, her eyes were drawn to one at the cheaper end of the stall — a staff slightly taller than she was.

Unlike the others, this staff was made of an unknown, glossy red material with black iron tips on both ends. It bore no inscriptions, and its red body looked weathered, as though it had seen many battles and better days.

Looking at it, something within Wang Julong compelled her to choose this staff. To ensure it was truly the weapon she wanted, Yan Xiaobao nodded in approval and approached the merchant. He paid for the weapons using the beast cores they had collected in the tunnels.

Chapter 426 Huge Risk

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When Yan Xiaobao saw the dwindling beast cores remaining, he heaved a deep sigh, but it was exactly as he had expected. Using beast cores or Demon Coins would quickly deplete their wealth. However, looking at these weapons, Yan Xiaobao felt that every core spent had been worth it.

Deng Wu, Sha Yun, and Wang Julong were not the only ones excited; the man selling the items had never made such a large sale before and greatly appreciated the sudden wealth he had just acquired. As for why they purchased crimson gear, he had no clue.

Once they acquired their new weapons, Yan Xiaobao couldn't help but smile, feeling as though death had been pushed further away than ever before. Yet, Xu Biao's words were engraved deeply within Yan Xiaobao's heart. He was fully aware that every day could be the last for him and his friends.

However, immense risk brought immense opportunity, and a life lived securely would never allow Yan Xiaobao and his friends to continue traversing the sacred dungeon.

With his thoughts solidified on winning the competition and then planning to slay the residential Demon Beast afterward, Yan Xiaobao raised his head and led his five-member team toward the arena.

Though it was still early, and the finals wouldn't begin until the sun rose to its zenith in the sky, Yan Xiaobao wanted to enter the arena nonetheless, so his friends could practice with the new weapons they'd purchased.

Walking through the arena, amidst semifinalists vying for spots in the lower ranks of the finals, Yan Xiaobao could already smell the blood in the air. The semifinals would begin as soon as the preliminary rankings were complete.

The battles were bloody and chaotic, but they had drawn in numerous spectators. Every outdoor stage was packed with people standing on their tiptoes for a glimpse of the action unfolding upon the platforms.

While Yan Xiaobao could understand the sport by observing expert matches, he struggled to comprehend how blood-soaked life-or-death battles could be viewed as a form of entertainment.

In years without tournaments, various teams would still fight each other based on wagers, but it was never quite this frequent or intense. After discussing with Xu Biao, Yan Xiaobao learned that one of the primary reasons for the bloody battles was to combat overpopulation, and similar events occurred annually in most dungeons.

Although experts were highly sought after, it was either the high-ranking ones or those possessing exceptional skills. The rest were left to fight lower-grade demons or die for public amusement, all while ensuring resources remained sufficient.

Thinking back on all these complexities, Yan Xiaobao sighed deeply and finally understood why something as precious as beast cores was used as common currency. While they were useful for some cultivators and experts, what truly mattered when demons were slain was bringing back the meat and anything edible.

With that in mind, Yan Xiaobao felt relieved that Deng Wu hadn't traded food for reference information upon their arrival in this new city. Yan Xiaobao wasn't a cold-hearted person unwilling to help others, but if someone brought forth an abundance of food and started using it to barter information, it would likely cause a stir in the town's begging districts.

Wu Yue sighed deeply, no longer focusing on the ways of this world but instead flashing his golden badge at the arena guards, gaining direct access to the only part of the town not visible to ordinary citizens.

Hui Yue entered first and immediately frowned at what he saw. Yan Xiaobao and his team weren't the first to arrive at the arena, despite the early hour.

On the stage stood Zhou Long, accompanied by a masked mercenary group. The group appeared to be conversing amicably amongst themselves, causing the hair on Yan Xiaobao's neck to stand on end. There was definitely something about Zhou Long that wasn't as it appeared.

Thinking this over, Yan Xiaobao was also aware that if Zhou Long truly wanted him dead, then the white-haired boy might already have lost his life. Zhou Long was at least a King-level expert, though Yan Xiaobao's impression was that his rank might be even higher—he was actually an Emperor-level expert.

Zhou Long's rank was not the most critical concern, but rather the familiarity displayed between the masked mercenary group and Zhou Long that set Yan Xiaobao on edge. Once again, he reconsidered his earlier decision to collaborate with the competition host.

Zhou Long's cultivation level was formidable, and the moment Yan Xiaobao entered the arena, Zhou Long immediately noticed them, despite standing with his back turned. He pivoted around in an instant.

At first, his expression was briefly evident, but within less than a second, it was entirely hidden beneath a gentle, cordial smile.

"Ah, I thought you would appear sooner! Are you hoping to practice like the other participants?" he asked in a friendly tone, gesturing toward the masked group.

"Oh, new weapons!" he continued, as if nothing was out of the ordinary. "I figure you'd want to test them? Please, don't mind us—carry on!"

As Zhou Long disappeared at the arena gates and the masked group settled into the front row, all eyes turned toward Yan Xiaobao and his friends, watching as his team prepared to begin practice. Everyone seemed eager to observe Yan Xiaobao and his friends' performance.

Knowing full well that practicing in front of another team would reveal too much information, Yan Xiaobao sighed deeply, and all five members of his team seated themselves at the edge of the stage, facing the masked group.

They sat there for hours—mask facing shadowy figures, cloaked silhouettes gazing back at masks. In the end, neither side managed to learn anything further. No one could decipher what had truly transpired between the two groups, leaving all parties none the wiser.

Chapter 427 Gigantic Risk_2

Sitting inside the arena, the cheers from the surroundings could be heard initially, as the battles outside the stage were being finalized. The contrast between the cheers and the silence reigning on the stage was stark, until a third party suddenly entered the fray.

Unlike the masked group and the invisible team, the third group had been living under the spotlight for the past two days, basking in all the attention and respect they garnered for reaching the finals.

"Haha, I see we're all here," the last entrant said. He was a towering man, his body taut, muscles rippling under his skin. He was the complete opposite of Hui Yue, his tanned skin, black hair, and black eyes distinct from Hui Yue's fair complexion and fiery demeanor. Yet, deep within his eyes was unwavering resolve to win—eerily similar to the steely determination glinting in Yan Xiaobao's icy blue gaze.

"Don't underestimate us just because we're not wearing stupid masks or mysterious cloaks," the man spoke again, a fierce smile playing on his lips, his face lighting up with anticipation for the battle ahead.

Yan Xiaobao narrowed his eyes slightly as he studied the man who had just spoken, focusing intently on the third team they were set to face.

Looking at the man and his team, Yan Xiaobao had to admit he'd underestimated them so far. He had been overly fixated on the masked group, and such carelessness might lead to their demise.

Fighting against two teams simultaneously only complicated matters. Yan Xiaobao could not afford to overlook the newcomers, while at the same time his gaze couldn't stray too far from the masked men either. The sense of threat he felt from them didn't sit well with him.

Hui Yue let out a deep sigh, suddenly tempted to abandon everything. He'd already encountered the Dragon Army, his initial goal, and though the prize was enticing, he wasn't willing to risk his friends' lives for it.

Thinking of this, a sly smile briefly flickered across Yan Xiaobao's face, and he shook his head. Ever since the appearance of the third group, he'd been burning with excitement, and he noticed the same exhilarating thrill in his friends' eyes.

Despite being a battle for survival, this was undoubtedly the kind of fight he wanted to join—the type of struggle where he could test his abilities against life-and-death stakes, pushing himself to his absolute limit.

Looking at the two groups, faint smiles appeared on the faces of all three teams. Even though two of the teams had their faces obscured by masks and cloaks, everyone in the arena could tell that they were smiling. All of them shared the anticipation that came before a fight for survival.

Walking towards the stage, the three groups now stood opposite one another. As spectators poured in through the gates, the teams watched them intently. Smiles could be seen on the visitors' faces, their voices ricocheting off the stone walls, and laughter only heightened the charged atmosphere.

Had Yan Xiaobao not known better, he might have thought the audience had come to watch a theatrical play instead of a brutal death match.

Yan Xiaobao felt time dragging slower than usual. Standing on the stage and observing both sides keenly, he knew he had to prepare for the worst-case scenario—both teams joining forces against him.

The chances of this happening were slim, but even a remote possibility demanded his attention.

While they stood on the stage, the audience filled the arena. Zhou Long slowly emerged from the side. As his gaze fell on Yan Xiaobao, he smiled. As he turned to the cloaked team, his smile faltered slightly. Finally, when he looked at the masked group, his expression grew colder.

Though Zhou Long maintained a smile on his face, a gleam of frost chilled his eyes. Yan Xiaobao noticed this shift instantly and furrowed his brows slightly.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please find your seats," Zhou Long raised his arms and twirled around, "Take your places so the battle we've all been waiting for can begin."

As always, Zhou Long's voice was deep and natural, yet everyone on the stage could hear him clearly. His words rang out loud and clear, and moments later, the audience slowly settled into silence, the atmosphere on the stage heavy with tension from the three teams.

They were watched by thousands of eyes, all eagerly anticipating the impending fight where blood would be spilled.

"Today, we'll witness the battle of three teams—some will falter and perish, while others will grow stronger and conquer! Today, we'll crown the most powerful mercenary group within the Demon Residence Cave!"

With that, a roar of cheers erupted before Zhou Long continued his speech. "Today, we have three groups duking it out. First up, we have the newcomers, the Invisible Mercenaries. While undoubtedly formidable, they've shown mercy to all groups they've faced so far, achieving nothing of note. Will they manage to continue this battle without bloodshed, or will they ultimately betray their ideals?"

"Next, we have the Masked Killers. Unlike our invisible friends, these ruthless mercenaries have beheaded every opponent they've faced. Will their spree of slaughter end here, or will they claim victory by drowning the arena in blood?"

"Lastly, we have the renowned Silver Edged Swords!" As their name was spoken, the cheers surged across the arena. "This group has grown up right here in our own city. Their diligent work in the tunnels has earned them a special place in our hearts, and now they have fought their way to the finals, facing two opposing teams—one peaceful and one bloodthirsty. Will they emerge victorious?"

After introducing the three teams, Zhou Long paused for a moment, letting the thundering cheers wash through the coliseum, his face graced with a satisfied smile.

"The rules are simple—the last team standing on the stage will be the winner. There are no restrictions on how to eliminate opponents, and it doesn't matter if only one individual survives. This is a battle royale—a fight to the death. Let the battle begin!"

As Zhou Long's last words echoed, Yan Xiaobao and his team subtly recalibrated their posture, half-summoning black blood while simultaneously igniting fireballs. Yan Xiaobao noticed, curiously, that the

masked group seemed entirely uninterested in him or his friends, their focus instead directed at the third group—the Silver Edged Swords.

Standing back, Yan Xiaobao narrowed his eyes. Were the Silver Edged Swords truly more dangerous than Hui Yue and his invisible allies, or was there a particular reason that explained why the masked group had chosen not to attack them?

Pausing, Yan Xiaobao decided not to engage either group just yet, instead signaling his allies to prepare their attacks, readying themselves to unleash their most potent spiritual arts once the victors of the ensuing skirmish revealed themselves.

Nodding, the others quickly positioned themselves for their preparations. Yan Xiaobao channeled more and more spiritual energy into his fireball, which soon grew too massive to grasp. It hovered above his head, radiating intense heat as smaller fireballs began to form around it, orbiting like asteroids around a blazing sun.

As the heat intensified and more fireballs were created, Yan Xiaobao casually grabbed some of the smaller spheres and hurled them across the stage toward the ten individuals locked in furiously contested combat.

The entire battle seemed surreal. On one side, ten men fought fiercely—bones breaking, blood spilling. Though none had fallen yet, the Masked Killers clearly held the advantage. Meanwhile, on the other side of the stage, no blood was shed.

Instead, five individuals stood awkwardly, staring down the ten fighters. In their hands were weapons purchased earlier that day by Hui Yue. On the ground lay a giant flower, its roots buried deep underground, lying in wait for the first person to approach.

Another fighter stood guarded, surrounded by four inscriptions imbued with spiritual energy, ready to activate and annihilate opponents once they entered his striking range.

Sha Yun's tail curled under her cloak, twitching against the ground as she impatiently awaited her turn to strike, frustrated that no one had entered her range.

Finally, at the forefront was their leader, Yan Xiaobao, whose fireball overhead clearly made him the most dangerous combatant. Casually tossing one ignited sphere after another, Yan Xiaobao found one Masked Mercenary who manipulated water with astonishing skill. He successfully kept the fire away from the masked group.

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Chapter 428 Matchmaking

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However, the Silver Edged Swords were not so lucky—the flames were devouring their clothes, quickly scorching their skin. Soon, the nauseating scent of charred flesh filled the arena.

While the masked mercenary group was extinguishing the random flames Yan Xiaobao had tossed at them, none of them turned toward him or his friends. They were entirely focused on another team, which made Yan Xiaobao feel that something was off.

Zhou Long had worked with this group before—was he the one who set up alliances in the previous match? But if that were the case, how could they turn on them like this?

Perhaps Xu Biao had something to do with it? Yan Xiaobao quickly dismissed the thought, recalling how he had been told to prepare for people dying in the final fight.

Yan Xiaobao's eyes flashed with a sharp determination. In any case, he hadn't heard of any fixed results, nor did he want to see his friends killed.

"Sha Yun, make a massive barrier in front of us using the soil of the stage," Yan Xiaobao ordered, offering no further explanation.

Sha Yun obeyed without questioning. Bending down, she placed both hands on the ground and tapped into her earthly affinity, raising a tall wall that nearly encircled the entire group.

When the audience saw the wall rise, confusion spread across their faces. While it could protect Yan Xiaobao and his friends, it also made it impossible for them to attack others. In the long run, no one seemed to benefit from this barrier.

Completely ignoring the audience, Yan Xiaobao gestured to his friends to stay behind. With a single thought, a massive fireball soared into the sky, arcing over the barrier and heading straight toward the combatants.

Fifteen men were on the stage at the moment, and Yan Xiaobao had no hesitation targeting them, deciding their survival would depend on their individual skills.

As soon as the Flame Treasure Pearl struck the first man, a thunderous explosion roared, much like the one felt earlier. The flames erupted fiercely, only stopping just before they could reach the audience—thanks to Zhou Long's intervention.

A golden glow appeared on Zhou Long's hand. In less than a second, golden threads formed a net that contained the explosive force of the flames. The astonished expression on his face betrayed his surprise, mingled with a hint of approval.

Yan Xiaobao and his friends hid behind the earthy barrier, waiting until the heat subsided. Yan Xiaobao nodded to Sha Yun, signaling for the Snake Woman to return to the stage.

Looking at the stage, Yan Xiaobao couldn't help but lift his head in amazement. Thirteen men still stood, seemingly unharmed, though seven were writhing on the ground, struggling to free themselves from the flames. Even the group members standing offstage seemed affected.

The entire masked team was still standing, though their clothing and masks had sustained significant damage. Their faces displayed shock, and under one of the damaged outfits, Yan Xiaobao spotted the insignia of the Dragon Army.

Three men from the Silver Edged Swords remained standing, and Hui Yue had to admit they were not to be underestimated.

Without missing a beat, Yan Xiaobao clapped his hands together, then knelt down. Summoning his earth flame from the sea of his spiritual energy, he caused a minor earthquake across the entire stage, trying to shake the men's focus.

"Now it's my turn!" Yan Xiaobao declared in a serious voice. Behind him, his friends each stepped forward, their bodies radiating light from the release of spiritual energy.

"Now it's my turn!" Yan Xiaobao repeated as four figures behind him stepped forward. Wang Julong chanted a spell briefly, then crushed a seed in her hand, sending a cloud of dust surging toward the opposing men.

Seeing the dust rushing toward them, the masked team's expressions became grave. Their leader grabbed two Silver Edged Swords members, wrapping an arm around their necks, and used them as shields to protect himself and the others from the approaching dust.

The two men absorbed the dust quickly. Afterward, the leader threw them off the stage, where their bodies convulsed and emitted bloodcurdling screams. A therapist skilled in Wood Element magic rushed to heal the now-disqualified men.

Having witnessed the danger of the dust, the opponents' faces showed heightened vigilance as they drew their weapons. Although most masked men wielded broadswords, the leader held a sword in each hand. An ominous aura radiated from him—a pure, murderous intent that signaled his weapons had been bathed in blood.

Watching the opponents closely, Hui Yue's brow furrowed slightly. He didn't want to face these men directly, but fortunately, they were no longer as sturdy as before. Their clothes and masks had been scorched, and visible wounds marred their skin—not just superficial cuts but deep burns, even on those standing in the back row.

"Wu," Yan Xiaobao whispered, "Although I didn't want us to use this, I don't think we can hold back anymore." As he spoke, a joyful glint flickered in his dark eyes. Yan Xiaobao almost chuckled, watching Deng Wu's eager expression as he prepared to showcase his skills.

With fluid movements, the four inscription patterns floating around Deng Wu dissolved simultaneously, only to be replaced by four completely different ones. These new inscriptions emanated an intimidating aura that was no less threatening than that of their adversaries.

Chapter 429 Matchmaking_2

The inscription patterns were entirely black, made with dried blood, and due to the sealed content, the paper had turned blood-red.

Releasing his spiritual energy, Deng Wu spread his arms wide, and a word escaped his lips, "Devour!" Silver light beamed from Deng Wu's body, illuminating four inscriptions, while four shadows appeared on the ground.

These shadows stood over two meters tall, and three meters wide, occupying a significant portion of the stage. All of them opened their mouths to let out ear-splitting howls. As the shadows howled, the audience heard a soul-wrenching wail, and vibrations rippled across the entire stage.

Visible astonishment was apparent in everyone's eyes as they saw the unmistakable silhouettes of black wolves emerging within the shadows. However, these were no ordinary wolves. These were not living creatures but shadows—beast-like soul shadows!

In the eyes of the masked group's leader, shock was evident, but as he ordered his subordinates, he clenched his fists. Facing soul shadows was a worst-case scenario. Only spiritual arts or individuals wielding martial power could defeat soul shadows, yet they also had to be constantly vigilant against the attacks of the wolf pack.

For Yan Xiaobao and his friends, the sheer size of the wolves created a significant advantage, forming a barrier that separated the three teams—none willing to approach them. But just as Yan Xiaobao began to feel safer, he saw a glimmering silver light strike the stage. Much to his dismay, he noticed how the opposing team clasped hands before five multicolored flames burst out between their five members.

Each mercenary possessed a different elemental affinity, and by merging their affinities, they created a five-colored flame, which gradually grew larger. Its force was enough to obliterate the entire stage, let alone the soul shadows.

"Leave the stage!" Yan Xiaobao shouted decisively. Though he had never seen anyone work together in this way before, Yan Xiaobao was unwilling to test its destructive capability, as grave danger loomed

overhead. Although Sha Yun and Deng Wu gazed at Yan Xiaobao with pleading eyes, they quickly understood that he was serious. Without saying a word, they leapt off the stage.

This flame was vastly different from Hui Yue's flame, which consisted only of a single element. This was an elemental flame, born from the fusion of five elements—a force Yan Xiaobao's protective measures could never withstand.

Securing second place was far better than witnessing his friends die, even if it meant he himself might ultimately perish. Thus, he chose to retreat.

Although Yan Xiaobao longed for victory as much as anyone else, his reason for entering this competition was to gain knowledge. The Dragon Army had already reached out to him, and for his first mission, sustaining injuries was an outcome they couldn't afford.

After jumping off the stage, Yan Xiaobao noticed Zhou Long's eyes glinting coldly, as he raised his hand with a smile. Golden light flared from his fingertips, encircling the elemental flame and beast-like soul shadows. With a decisive grip, the wolf pack let out another silent howl before gradually dematerializing into thin air. Before vanishing, the wolves sent tremors through the arena, morphing into Heaven and Earth Essence.

With the wolves gone, Zhou Long's simple grasp completely obliterated the elemental flame, causing Yan Xiaobao to squint. The flame's destruction triggered an energy backlash that swept through the masked group, leaving some vomiting blood and collapsing onto the floor. There was no way to contend with a team of such success.

"Congratulations to the masked assassins," Zhou Long said with a feigned smile to the crowd. "I present to you, the winners!" The announcer was visibly upset, though no one in the audience seemed to notice. However, what they did see was the leader still standing on stage, pale-faced, his hands trembling lightly.

"I think the second-place team deserves a round of applause for surviving the entire battle!" Zhou Long continued. Still, the audience booed Yan Xiaobao, leaving the young man with a bitter smile.

Their disdain was to be expected. In the first half of the battle, Yan Xiaobao and his friends merely observed, taking no action as the other two groups clashed. Later, when he caused the explosion, just as

the real fight was about to begin—with the beasts' soul shadows and multicolored flame—they walked away.

Retreating just as the fight grew interesting was undoubtedly a frustration for the crowd, but as Yan Xiaobao bowed to Zhou Long and left the stage, he cared little for their opinions. After all, no one wanted to linger around a defeated contender.

Back in the courtyard, countless thoughts swirled in Yan Xiaobao's mind. It was obvious that the masked cultivators were part of the Dragon Army, as Yan Xiaobao had noticed the captain's insignia beneath the scorched clothing of their leader, not to mention Zhou Long's interactions with the group.

Although Yan Xiaobao had confirmed that the masked group belonged to the Dragon Army, he couldn't stop pondering why Zhou Long seemed to want Yan Xiaobao to win, and why Zhou Long's previously friendly demeanor puzzled him.

Now, Yan Xiaobao found himself wondering what was happening with the residential Demon Beast. Had it truly awakened, or had it been intentionally roused to create an event? Why did everything seem to happen when Yan Xiaobao appeared, and why did Hui Yue—who initially wanted nothing to do with the Dragon Army—now seem eager to please?

Unable to make sense of the unfolding events, Yan Xiaobao's mind remained clouded as he quickly left the area and made his way to the courtyard, where he saw Xu Biao waiting for him.

Focusing on the man, Yan Xiaobao found himself wondering whether Xu Biao had informed Zhou Long about Yan Xiaobao's origins. Careful observation revealed that Zhou Long and Xu Biao shared little in common and seemed unaffected by one another's actions, yet Yan Xiaobao couldn't rule out any possibilities.

Nodding slightly to Xu Biao without speaking, Yan Xiaobao stepped into the courtyard. He immediately sat down and began to meditate—not to cultivate, but to clear his mind, in hopes of understanding the chain of events more clearly.

From the outset, they had entered the Cave's End, moving steadily to rescue the sun. During that time, they had slain and hidden an entire group sent by the Dragon Army, marking their only prior interaction

with the Dragon Army before entering the Demon Residence Cave. Zhou Long had been overly friendly with Yan Xiaobao from the very beginning.

After speaking with Xu Biao and revealing that they were from the surface world, the man had taken notable interest in Yan Xiaobao and his team. Yet, Xu Biao's excitement seemed driven more by a desire to personally experience the surface world than by any intent to sell information about them to others.

No matter which angle Yan Xiaobao considered, he couldn't fathom how or why Senior Expert Zhou Long had suddenly developed an interest in him. All he could do was stay vigilant and plan his escape at the earliest opportunity.

At least Zhou Long remained amicable, and Yan Xiaobao was fairly confident Xu Biao wouldn't turn hostile. He ultimately decided to settle the matter.

When he opened his eyes, Yan Xiaobao saw all of his friends gathered around him, waiting eagerly to hear his decision. Though each had their say regarding the events, they had long agreed to follow Yan Xiaobao's lead, making his words law.

"Rest for now," Yan Xiaobao sighed, noticing Xu Biao and Xie Lan observing from afar, while an anxious expression marked Xu Biao's face, as he fretted over Yan Xiaobao's decision.

"We'll go along with Zhou Long to investigate the residential Demon Beast," Yan Xiaobao said with a long sigh. He knew his friends were looking forward to beast hunting. And seeing how Zhou Long had effortlessly dispelled the elemental flame, a threat that would have eradicated Yan Xiaobao's team, Yan Xiaobao understood avoiding Zhou Long wasn't an option. It was best to stay on his good side and hopefully uncover some clues as to why this high-level expert found Yan Xiaobao so intriguing—whether it involved the Dragon Army or not.

Hearing Hui Yue's comment, smiles spread across everyone's faces, as their excitement spilled out while discussing the hunt. Although they understood the risks, none seemed worried—instead, they brimmed with enthusiasm. Soon, they busied themselves with cultivation or preparations for the beast hunt in their own ways.

Xu Biao was as thrilled as anyone, eager to participate in the hunt himself, though Yan Xiaobao's worried expression cast a shadow over his spirit. Xu Biao couldn't shake the unease niggling at the back of his mind.

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Chapter 430 Demon Beast

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"What the f*ck is that?!" Zhou Long slammed his fist onto the table, his eyes blazing with anger, his formerly friendly demeanor nowhere to be seen.

In front of him stood five men, all of whom had won previous contests. "But sir," the leader spoke up, wearing a displeased expression on his face, "he's a necromancer. If we let him touch us, we'll die."

"Then die!" Zhou Long roared back, his expression unmistakably furious. "I said you can kill the others, but do not touch the white-haired boy! We received a message from headquarters saying he's divine! He's what a great general needs!"

The more Zhou Long thought about it, the angrier he became. His plan had been perfect. He had ordered the organization to kill some of Yan Xiaobao's companions, but the elemental flames would severely injure the one person he was supposed to protect.

Closing his eyes and pinching the bridge of his nose, Zhou Long let out a long sigh. He sat in silence for a moment, the five men in front of him all quiet, none of them daring to move or utter a word.

"When we face the Demon Beast, don't mess this up. I've been ordered to get rid of his followers and ensure he stays with the Dragon Army until his master, General Frozen, comes to claim him. If you screw this up, your lives are on the line."

With that, Zhou Long waved his hand dismissively, showing nothing but disdain. Without waiting for further instructions, the group of five rushed out the door, leaving Zhou Long alone in the office.

Zhou Long opened his eyes again and sighed once more. Picking up a Memory Stone from the desk, he pressed it against his forehead. As he did, a bright light illuminated the stone, revealing Yan Xiaobao's photo alongside a written message: "The origin of the stranger is unclear. If a group of four appears within your cave, you must investigate their backgrounds. If the group includes this individual, ensure he is guided to headquarters. Killing his companions will increase the reward."

Looking out the window, Zhou Long smiled faintly, standing up and whistling a cheerful tune as he walked out of the office.

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Yan Xiaobao sat in meditation when he suddenly felt a sense of danger arise beside him. His eyes snapped open, only to find Zhou Long sitting next to him, wearing a friendly smile, as if he hadn't noticed the wary expression on Yan Xiaobao's face.

Yan Xiaobao narrowed his eyes, once again confirming that Zhou Long truly had no intention of harming him. Somehow, his friendliness felt more terrifying than overt hostility. Hatred could be created from nothing, but friendliness was something people usually had to earn first.

"You made a great decision during the contest," Zhou Long said with a bright smile. "If you hadn't left the stage, who knows what would've happened? Those elemental flames are undoubtedly a troublesome ability. But those Soul Shadow Wolves are certainly quite impressive in their own right!"

Listening to Zhou Long's words, Yan Xiaobao couldn't help but feel that something was amiss, but he said nothing, merely focusing on the words of the Dragon Army soldier before him.

Zhou Long was dangerous. He was undoubtedly stronger than Xie Lan and Xu Biao. In many ways, his strength seemed akin to Lan Feng's, though Yan Xiaobao knew Zhou Long was unlikely to be as powerful as Lan Feng, yet still couldn't afford to underestimate him.

Lan Feng was Yan Xiaobao's hidden trump card. If he had his way, Lan Feng would remain the strength he never revealed, which was why he dared to follow Zhou Long into the Demon Beast lair.

If the worst-case scenario occurred, he would have to rely on Little Dragon's Lan Feng and Deng Wu. If the four of them worked together, they could likely evade Zhou Long, but this was merely his estimation. It depended on how much Wuwei Lanfeng had managed to improve and how Phoenix continually refused to answer any of Yan Xiaobao's inquiries.

Overall, Lan Feng wouldn't speak with Yan Xiaobao unless it was critical. For the most part, he sat deep within the Dantian Cave in a meditative trance, a golden light emanating from his soul while he drew spiritual energy from the spiritual energy sea and Qi from the Qi whirlpool.

Yan Xiaobao sighed, smiling faintly at Zhou Long but remaining on high alert, keeping his guard at its peak.

"There's no need to worry so much," Zhou Long said as he looked at Yan Xiaobao. His face was full of smiles, even showing an apologetic look. When he saw Yan Xiaobao awaken from his deep meditation, his eyes sparkled with genuine curiosity.

"Let me tell you a secret," Zhou Long continued. "The masked men were actually mine, but they weren't supposed to use that elemental flame. It's an attack reserved for life-threatening situations. Considering you've never killed anyone before, I'm sure you wouldn't kill my men either. I thoroughly reprimanded them, and they've expressed their deepest apologies!"

Yan Xiaobao laughed quietly and said softly, "Don't worry," he assured Zhou Long. "It was our failure. In the end, your men were stronger than us; they deserved to win."

Upon hearing Yan Xiaobao's relaxed demeanor, a genuine smile appeared on Zhou Long's face, his eyes filled with gratitude. It was clear that the older man was afraid Yan Xiaobao might oppose him, or perhaps refuse to join the team when they set out to kill the Demon Beast.

Full of concern, Zhou Long couldn't resist asking him, "Do you still have an interest in joining us for the hunt later?" A hint of worry was visible in his eyes, and Yan Xiaobao once again believed this man truly wished to befriend him. Yet even so, there remained no reason for Yan Xiaobao to let his guard down. Something suspicious was bound to happen.