

Medical 431

Chapter 431 Demon Beast_2

"We are more than happy to join the hunting expedition," Yan Xiaobao said with a smile, a gleam flashing in his eyes, "My friends are eagerly looking forward to this hunt. It's surprising and fortunate that we managed to arrive at this cavern, right when the legendary beast it was named after is about to awaken."

"If you don't mind, I'd like to invite Guild Master Xu Biao and his assistant, Xie Lan. We are good friends, and having more people help out would indeed be excellent," Yan Xiaobao continued, showing no hesitation or trace of concern in his expression.

Seeing Yan Xiaobao's desire to involve Guild Master Zhou Long in the hunt, Zhou Long was briefly taken aback. However, he quickly concealed his thoughts, exchanging mutual smiles with Yan Xiaobao—one trying to maintain goodwill, and the other striving to discern even the slightest hint from Zhou Long's demeanor.

"Of course, having the guild master and his assistant join us would be our honor," Zhou Long said after some contemplation, "Both of them are Upper Dantian experts; they will be valuable assets in the hunt."

Upon hearing Zhou Long's response, Yan Xiaobao let out a relieved sigh. Noticing Zhou Long's brief hesitation, even for just a moment, was enough to confirm that Xu Biao hadn't disclosed all relevant details to Zhou Long, heightening his suspicions further.

Zhou Long stood up, offering a polite nod before heading toward the exit, leaving Yan Xiaobao in deep thought.

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Zhong Hui sat in the Frozen Castle, a rare smile appearing on his face. In front of him knelt a Crusader.

The Crusader had arrived earlier, bringing with him the Memory Stone, which was the reason behind Zhong Hui's joyous mood. Placing the Memory Stone against his forehead, Zhong Hui once again saw the recorded scenes of Yan Xiaobao's performance during the matches.

Zhong Hui's smile widened as he watched the recordings over and over, utterly disregarding the man kneeling on the ground.

Only one Crusader had returned, while the others remained trapped in the Underworld. Collecting the memos from every cavern had taken far more time than expected. Even so, Zhong Hui found no cause for concern about his followers' urgency. As long as he obtained what he sought, nothing else mattered. His year-long hunt had finally concluded.

Sliding the Memory Stone into his pocket, Zhong Hui chuckled to himself, his laughter echoing in the silent Frozen Castle as he dismissed the continuously kowtowing Crusader.

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Over the following days, Yan Xiaobao and his friends spent considerable time preparing for the hunt. Xu Biao no longer stayed in the guild master's office but instead spent most of his time in the same courtyard as Yan Xiaobao and his companions.

Witnessing Xu Biao and Xie Lan's constant bickering, Yan Xiaobao fully understood the power imbalance between the two. Wu Wei was precisely what Yan Xiaobao had known all along—it didn't rely on elements or Qi. It entirely depended on finding harmony and the ability to merge with the world.

The profound nature of Wu Wei was not something Yan Xiaobao invested significant time studying, as he could not generate energy himself. Instead, he focused on analyzing the spiritual energy that filled the sea of his spiritual energy.

Knowing that Xu Biao and Zhou Long had no shared connections, Yan Xiaobao had been earnestly attempting to befriend Xu Biao, echoing how Xu Biao had done everything to befriend Yan Xiaobao. Their friendship was based on mutual understanding.

While Xu Biao sought friendship with Yan Xiaobao in the hopes of one day venturing into the outer world, Yan Xiaobao befriended him to secure the protection of two King Experts as his rear guard—should Zhou Long suddenly decide to change his attitude and withdraw his overt friendliness.

Xie Lan was the only one in the courtyard visibly discontented with the way things were unfolding. Initially, she felt she had let Xu Biao down, as her borrowed abilities had not ensured their victory. Ultimately, she found herself unable to contribute anything meaningful.

This feeling of disappointing her master was hard for her to stomach. Every glance at Yan Xiaobao reminded her of her failure, leaving the otherwise striking young woman in a constant state of furrowed brows.

Xu Biao had long assured her that not winning was acceptable, especially since it appeared the group's circumstances hadn't been strained. Though he had wanted first place, the Mercenary Association paid for their housing and food, which were no longer a concern for his squad.

Victory held no significance to Yan Xiaobao. He had spent his beast core acquiring weapons in the hopes that their remaining possessions would suffice for survival once more in the tunnels.

What further fueled Yan Xiaobao's smugness was the prospect of assisting the Dragon Army in ridding the caverns of the Demon Beast—a creature so colossal that the cavern's entire name was derived from it, its lair rumored to be overflowing with treasures. Even if the Dragon Army claimed the beast core, Yan Xiaobao was confident their reward would include bones, meat, fur, and perhaps even horns or feathers. Content with this belief, Yan Xiaobao and his friends currently had no concerns about their finances.

"This is it!" As Zhou Huixuan and his companions passed the last row of houses, Zhou Long's face broke into a smile, signifying their official departure from the Mercenary City, albeit briefly.

Zhou Long wasn't alone; five others followed him. Yan Xiaobao immediately recognized them as the contestants from their prior competition. Yet despite their victory, the five seemed far from pleased, evidently harboring unease about the entire challenge.

Yan Xiaobao not only brought along his three loyal friends but also Xu Biao and Xie Lan, expanding his team more than ever. With the support of these two King-level experts, Yan Xiaobao felt significantly more secure.

Zhou Long's smile was genuine as he observed the white-haired young man entering view. The sight of Yan Xiaobao's stark white locks stirred memories, leading Zhou Long to associate him with General Frozen—a young prodigy of remarkable importance, surpassing anyone in the Underworld.

Yan Xiaobao was entirely unaware of Zhou Long's thoughts. While outwardly appearing calm and casual, he was inwardly vigilant in observing Zhou Long's movements. Behind him, Sha Yun, Deng Wu, and Wang Julong took in the sprawling landscapes before them in wonder.

Before them stretched a forest, with hills visible from within the cavern. Gazing at the horizon, the cave seemed to have no apparent end—eerily akin to the surface world.

Birds chirped and glided through the air as Yan Xiaobao chuckled softly, noticing Sha Yun's struggle to take in the breathtaking scene ahead.

"We'll need to travel for several days before reaching the habitat of the Demon Beast," Zhou Long stated solemnly, the mirth in his eyes vanishing.

"The Demon Beast began to stir years ago, but it's taken three entire years to fully awaken. I was personally dispatched to this cavern to deal with it, though I alone am insufficient. This is why a team is required, and I trust you all recognize that. Each member is at a master level and specializes in formations—an advanced spiritual art achievable only by specific groups."

"Formation experts are highly esteemed within the Dragon Army due to their ability to merge elements and unleash attacks beyond their cultivation bases. However, the use of formations comes with strict stipulations regarding time and location."

Zhou Long made sure to thoroughly explain everything, leaving no detail unsaid, which again made Yan Xiaobao feel uneasy. Why was this man explaining everything to him? Yan Xiaobao was born to a poor family, with no prior connections to the divine underground city. He couldn't fathom why Zhou Long tended to treat him in such a peculiar manner.

"The beast we're hunting is enormous," Zhou Long continued, oblivious to the peculiar look in Yan Xiaobao's eyes, "If you look at those mountains over there," he said, pointing toward the distant mountain range. Yan Xiaobao squinted, using Qi to enhance his vision. He saw two parallel mountain peaks, stretching over fifty kilometers apart at points.

"The beast resides within that dense mountain range. While it doesn't span the entire range, it's still remarkably large—a horned serpent that has existed in this cavern since its creation. Over the years, it's absorbed the essence of heaven and earth, refining it within its beast core."

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Chapter 432 Large Gathering

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"This beast is at least of an Emperor-ranked level. It might even be a Saint, but it has been asleep for thousands of years. Even if it wakes now, the beast won't be able to move its body. We will fully take advantage of this."

"Although it can't move its body, it can still wield the energy it has refined over the years, and it has some extremely dangerous attacks. We've never truly seen it unleash its full power because we've never actually attacked it before. When that happens, be mindful of your own safety."

"The beast's affinity lies with the Wood Element. It's a Master of healing itself while breathing life into plants, and those plants might be far more dangerous than that little flower following you," he said, glancing at the small poppy as he continued.

"All in all, once we arrive, we'll group up for the task. I'll work alone, the formation team will work alone, and the six of you will work as a unit. Make sure you survive the fight. Extraordinary rewards await you."

With that said, Zhou Long said no more, but instead spent time sprinting ahead, pointing toward the distant mountains for everyone to see.

A large group of twelve surged across the landscape. Along the journey, they passed many fields and farms sustained through agriculture. Contrary to appearances, these farms were not part of small family villages but scattered independently.

Through the ever-changing scenery of fields, roads, open plains, and forested areas on Sunday, Zhou Long successfully led the group through the first day. As the sun dipped low beyond the cave's edge, he came to a halt.

Watching the horizon, Yan Xiaobao flashed a bitter smile as memories of the sun danced through her mind. Though her body remained in the forest, she continued building among the four Divine Beasts across the world, even within the Demon Residence Cave.

Eventually, they set up camp at the outskirts of a small woodland, with Yan Xiaobao starting a fire and collecting wood. Sha Yun set up the tents, while Deng Wu and Wang Julong prepared the food.

The team had been together for a long time, each member knowing their role. Every time they camped, their coordination worked like a well-oiled machine.

The seamless teamwork amazed them all, surprising even themselves as they realized what they had been doing only when Wang Julong and Deng Wu called out to them. The food was ready and smelled divine.

The meal consisted of warm broth with vegetables and meat, all of which they'd purchased before the journey. Tempted by the inviting aroma, the group—made up of learned experts—nearly drooled. Having not rested all day, the tantalizing scent lured them, and Wang Julong even chuckled as the growls of empty stomachs betrayed the cultivators' reservations.

"Come and eat," she said softly before pouring the broth into bowls. Then she added, "There's plenty for everyone." Shortly after, all twelve experts sat cross-legged on the ground, happily enjoying the prepared meal.

Wang Julong and Deng Wu made sure everyone had enough to eat. After finishing the hearty meal, most of the group dozed off, leaving only Yan Xiaobao and Sha Yun awake, their vigilant eyes scanning their surroundings.

"How long do you think we'll be stuck under this ground?" Sha Yun raised her head, curious, gazing at the star-filled sky. The moon hung directly beneath the stone ceiling, its sight unlike anything seen by outsiders or even close friends.

"I don't know," Yan Xiaobao replied honestly. "I can't even tell how long we've been here," he added with a sigh. "The passage of time in the tunnel muddles my sense, but I think we won't leave within a year."

Sha Yun nodded, not surprised that it might be longer. "We're going to fight this beast," she continued, scanning cautiously to ensure everyone was asleep. "Is there something else on your mind?" she asked, her voice tinged with worry for her friend.

Yan Xiaobao smiled bitterly before giving a small nod, sharing his concerns in a low voice. Having Sha Yun nearby was truly one of the few things that brought him peace. She was always there for him, supporting him, even noticing things he tried to hide. His actions never escaped her watchful eye.

As the night deepened and the moon rose higher, Sha Yun understood Yan Xiaobao's thoughts entirely. Yet even so, she couldn't address his concerns directly. Listening to him speak, she too noticed how strange it was for someone as esteemed as Zhou Long to seemingly show favoritism toward Yan Xiaobao. It felt odd, as if she and the others were invisible to Zhou Long.

Although Sha Yun hadn't realized it before, Zhou Long had never seemed interested in interacting with her or the others. It was as though none of them mattered to him, which puzzled her deeply. Before this journey, he'd had only two conversations with Yan Xiaobao about their training, making his behavior all the more baffling. Not once had anyone noticed Zhou Long entering their courtyard.

With the moon climbing high above, Deng Wu and Wang Julong woke from their slumber. Both prepared to take over the second watch of the night, nodding wearily as Yan Xiaobao and Sha Yun retreated to their tents, falling asleep almost instantly.

Through the rest of the night, nothing significant occurred. As dawn broke, Sha Yun quickly packed up all the tents while Deng Wu whipped up breakfast in the form of porridge. Seeing yet another satisfying meal awaiting them, everyone was in high spirits, eating contentedly, knowing full well there would be no rest in the day ahead. Before they were fully awake, they charged forward—towards the demon's beast with urgency, seizing every fragmented second in their favor.

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Having wrapped up the last of their affairs, the twelve companions once again surged toward the mountain range, though the mountain seemed no closer despite their relentless pace. Yet, the scenery surrounding them was dramatically changing.

No longer were there open plains or farmland; instead, the terrain began to feature massive boulders and rocks. The ground subtly sloped upward, and smaller trees and sparse forests gave way to dense pinewoods as they pressed onward, further in the direction of the mountain.

The path they had been following had completely vanished; now they traversed animal trails or forged their own paths through the wilderness.

The companions had traveled for several days without rest before finally reaching the base of the parallel mountain ranges. As they prepared to ascend, excitement welled up within them.

Moving through cave systems brought them steadily closer to their destination each day. Every passing day echoed the first, a relentless quest of determination.

After a brief journey with Yan Xiaobao and his friends, the awkwardness between the formation experts and the others dissipated, and conversations began to flow between the two groups.

Though they avoided critical matters or sharing vital information, they instead spoke eagerly of tantalizing battles, the weather, or past discussions on vegetation diversity.

The conversations, though shallow and trivial, fostered a more comfortable atmosphere, leaving everyone feeling calm and at ease as they made their way toward the distant, veiled mountain range.

Day by day, they drew closer until one evening, they found themselves standing at the foot of the mountain. As they prepared to scale the final obstacle blocking their path, smiles of excitement lit their faces.

Seeing how close they had come, everyone pushed themselves to their limits, racing toward the summit at an astounding pace. They scrambled over the rugged, steep terrain as the twelve cultivators ascended together.

Yan Xiaobao was the first to reach the peak, likely because Zhou Long had inadvertently held the others back. His gaze fell onto the valley nestled between the two parallel mountain ranges, and his eyes widened in astonishment as he took a deep breath of the cool air.

When Zhou Long had described the beast as massive, he had certainly not exaggerated. While the beast didn't occupy the entire valley, its sheer length spanned several kilometers.

The beast's scales were a murky green, each one as tall as Yan Xiaobao and twice the length of a human. Its elongated body rested entirely within the valley, its massive head lying directly below Yueyue. Yan Xiaobao could not help but question whether it was truly possible to assist Zhou Long in defeating a serpent of such ancient and overwhelming size.

The head was far larger than Yan Xiaobao had anticipated—ten meters long and seven meters wide. Atop the serpent's forehead, a towering, somewhat serrated spiral-shaped horn caught his eye. The horn appeared razor-sharp, its bony frame astonishingly pristine, shimmering faintly with a silvery hue from within.

One by one, the others caught up to Yan Xiaobao. As they peered down at the colossal beast, solemn expressions replaced their earlier confidence. Though they had initially believed themselves capable of vanquishing it, their certainty began to crumble as they stood beside the slumbering creature.

"Let's set up camp here," Zhou Long spoke in a low voice as he watched the beast, his tone calm, devoid of any surprise or doubt. It was evident he had encountered this creature many times before.

Hearing Zhou Long's suggestion, Yan Xiaobao nodded. Although the creature's size had shocked him as well, he had quickly observed that it was indeed in a state of deep sleep. If they managed to strike while it slept, their chances of victory would significantly improve.

The thing that reassured Yan Xiaobao the most about their prospects of success was Zhou Long himself. There was nothing ordinary about this man; the fact that he had been sent to this Demon Residence Cave underscored the importance the higher-ups placed on acquiring its Demon Core.

Reflecting on Zhou Long's abilities and how effortlessly he had defeated the shadows formed of elemental flame and beast spirits, Yan Xiaobao found a quiet alertness stirring within him as his eyes roamed their surroundings.

The camp was established as smoothly as on any other night. Once the food was prepared, everyone gathered around Zhou Long, impatient to hear about the plan.

"As you've guessed, that beast down there is none other than the Devil-Dwelling Beast for which this cave is named," Zhou Long began, stretching lazily as he gazed into the valley, where the serpent's massive form lay.

Looking at the creature, Zhou Long showed neither fear nor hesitation, only a patient indifference, as though staring at an insignificant worm he could crush with ease.

"At dawn, we'll descend into the valley along the gorge. Once inside, we'll split into three groups. The formation experts will move to the right flank, I'll head to the left, and the rest will approach the serpent's head," he continued.

"During the assault, everyone must watch their backs. If someone dies, they are to blame no one but themselves."

"Forming the spiritual art will require the use of elemental flame, and I hope you can also utilize elemental star fall." With that, Zhou Long cast a meaningful glance at the formation experts, who all nodded in agreement.

"I expect you to use every attack at your disposal," Zhou Long said with a smile to Yan Xiaobao. "Do your best, but remember—your survival is paramount."

Hearing this, Yan Xiaobao couldn't help but wonder why his survival was so critical. However, he had no intention of questioning the older man. Instead, he nodded quietly and ate his meal, avoiding any unnecessary eye contact with Zhou Long.

That night, like every other in their journey, the group retired early. Yet Yan Xiaobao stayed awake on the first watch, his eyes fixed on the beast below.

Wrapped tightly in his blanket, Yan Xiaobao stared at the creature, its sleeping form illuminated by the light spilling down from the moon and stars. The beast clearly remained in a deep slumber, and Yan Xiaobao saw no reason to believe it might awaken or detect their presence anytime soon.

Had the decision to execute it been driven by their need for a powerful beast core? Yan Xiaobao knew the creature below was likely an Emperor-level entity. It wasn't quite as powerful as Lan Feng, but it felt markedly stronger than Xie Lan and Xu Biao. Its aura was palpable, affecting every cultivator nearby.

Considering this aura, the only person with a presence akin to that of Lan Feng was Zhou Lan. Yet Yan Xiaobao suspected him of being a Peak Emperor cultivator, and most likely, his rank was accurate.

"May I sit here?" Zhou Long's voice startled Yan Xiaobao, the older man appearing once more without warning and eliciting the same subtle unease as before.

Despite his discomfort and remaining on guard, Yan Xiaobao's demeanor betrayed nothing. His expression was calm, much like when he spoke with Sha Yun.

Patting the ground beside him, Yan Xiaobao gestured for Zhou Long to sit. Though casual in manner, this gesture acknowledged Zhou Long as one of his trusted companions. Zhou Long's smile deepened significantly in response.

"Are you nervous about tomorrow?" Zhou Long asked after a moment of silence, his eyes narrowing slightly as they fixed on the beast below.

"Not really," Yan Xiaobao replied with a smile. "Truth be told, I'm fairly certain that you alone could deal with this creature," he added, studying Zhou Long's expression.

A knowing smirk curled on Zhou Long's lips—one whose meaning was inscrutable.

"It will be dangerous," Zhou Long said quietly. "Even with me here, it will be dangerous. If you find yourself in a position you cannot handle, make sure to come to me. I will see to it that you survive." With that promise, he patted Yan Xiaobao's shoulder before rising to his feet. "I should get some sleep," he added, offering it as his excuse to leave. "Tomorrow will be a fierce battle, and you'll need all the rest you can get."

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Chapter 434 The Perfect Timing

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When Zhou Long left Yan Xiaobao, the white-haired boy furrowed his brows, recalling the man's words. He would help Yan Xiaobao survive, but what about Yan Xiaobao's friends? Would they not receive any help?

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As the sun broke over the sky, everyone was already up, having packed their tents and finished breakfast.

Today was going to be a busy day; they were heading out to find the biggest snake Yan Xiaobao had ever seen, let alone heard of. Although Zhou Long's earlier words left him slightly uneasy, he believed in his ability to keep his friends alive, and all of them were eager for the hunt ahead.

Moving down the canyon was far simpler than he had anticipated. The twelve cultivators descended the steep slope silently, quickly making their way to the mist-filled valley below.

Zhou Long's choice of morning wasn't just because the beast would still be asleep but also because it was a reptile. It was a creature that drew strength from the heat radiating off the sun — the higher the sun was in the sky, the stronger and faster it would become. To stand a chance against it, Zhou Long required impeccable timing, which was exactly what they aimed for.

The closer they got to the beast, the heavier the pressure became. Sweat began to drip onto their faces, and their irregular heartbeat was accompanied by involuntary smiles of anticipation as they neared their target.

Upon reaching the beast, the tension was suffocating. Even Hui Yue felt the cold sweat on his back, but despite this, he wasn't scared. If anything, the intensity heightened his excitement, drawing him helplessly toward the impulse to strike.

Yan Xiaobao stood beside the beast, signaling to his companions to follow him. Keeping a ten-meter distance between them, they finally stopped before the nose of the snake — staring at its massive face, which was larger than the inns they'd stayed in.

Each time it exhaled, the snake's slit-like eyes closed, releasing breaths that felt like gale winds. Yan Xiaobao stood firm, refraining from summoning the Black Blood, understanding that direct contact with such a colossal beast would mean certain death. Instead, he conjured flames in his hand, slowly transitioning from deep crimson to pale blue.

Watching the Blue Flame, Yan Xiaobao couldn't help but smile with excitement. Behind him, his companions were preparing in their own ways.

Deng Wu summoned a small army of over fifty soul shadows, while Sha Yun took a step back and merged with the earth itself, allowing the ground to claim her physical form during the process.

Wang Julong, different from the others, wielded the red staff Yan Xiaobao had purchased for her. In front of her was a large group of tiny poppies; all of them stood ready at the field of poppies, poised to strike as soon as Zhou Long gave the order.

Standing before the beast's massive head, Hui Yue's fists clenched slightly as he realized he might have underestimated the snake before him. Even so, he knew this battle was inevitable. Retreat was no longer an option.

"GO!" Zhou Long's voice, unlike its usual calmness, was instead filled with murderous intent, echoing throughout the valley and far away.

The deafening roar instantly roused the previously dormant snake, its massive body beginning to shift. Yan Xiaobao held his ground, refraining from moving closer to the creature. Instead, he poured spiritual energy into his hand, fueling the Blue Flame to absorb as much as it could. At the same time, Yan Xiaobao took out some refined bone marrow, refined bone powder, and unprocessed beast cores.

These additional ingredients were fed into the flame, causing it to expand in size and roar with such intensity that it shot skyward. The air filled with the sound of roaring flames as Yan Xiaobao extracted small fireballs from the inferno, launching them at the snake one by one.

Although Yan Xiaobao wielded the most dangerous firepower he could muster, he was only at Master Level. His elemental affinity and spiritual energy reflected his capabilities. The beast he faced, however, was Emperor-ranked. The Blue Flame managed to destroy one scale at a time, causing it to catch fire

and crack open to expose patches of flesh beneath. For a flame cast by a Master-level cultivator, this was an extraordinary result.

Yan Xiaobao wasn't the only one attacking with everything he had. After Yan Xiaobao shattered a small cluster of scales, the flesh beneath was assaulted by Wang Julong's poppies, following Zhou Long's command.

Compared to the venom naturally present in the Horned Snake's body, the poison in the poppies was far weaker. Yet, even so, one by one, the tiny flowers sacrificed themselves, infusing the snake's flesh with a trace of venom. Though minuscule, they aimed to inject enough poison to momentarily stun the snake, thereby increasing their chances of defeating it.

A roar erupted from the awakened Horned Snake's massive mouth. Its deafening cry alone was enough to shake the mountains. Boulders and rocks began cascading toward the three groups of cultivators, who scrambled to evade them.

"Yun!" Yan Xiaobao urgently shouted. The earth-merged woman responded with a nod, raising her arms. Beside her, the earth started moving, creating two barriers to intercept the falling debris, significantly slowing their descent and making them easier to avoid.

Hui Le nodded in approval, wiping sweat from his forehead. He continually channeled spiritual energy into the Blue Flame overhead, extracting fireballs one after another to penetrate the Horned Snake's thick armor.

Yan Xiaobao and his companions remained directly in front of the snake, which meant the only part they could see was the area surrounding its mouth. The snake's eyes were positioned on either side of its head.

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Yan Xiaobao, Zhou Long, and the formation expert were placed in a triangle, with Zhou Long standing in front of the right eye and the formation expert to the left. Although Yan Xiaobao's position in front of the mouth seemed dangerous, the other two groups were in the most perilous positions because they were the first things the snake would see.

Yan Xiaobao didn't realize it, but the Horned Snake had indeed opened its eyes. Although the damage caused by Yan Xiaobao wasn't immense, it was still enough to hurt the snake, and they weren't the only ones attacking.

On one side, Yan Xiaobao could feel the aura of the elemental flame he summoned, much more domineering than the one he summoned in the match. On the other side, very powerful energy waves were sweeping through.

Behind Yan Xiaobao, Xie Lan, and Xu Biao, there was a period of silence, as the two of them were preparing two attacks containing considerable martial power, but to replace Yan Xiaobao and his friend, they needed the snake to open its mouth.

Hui Yue continued to destroy scale after scale, witnessing how the shadows of the beast's soul corroded its flesh, destroying everything in their path. More painful hisses could be heard from the beast as its skin was corroded and its scales burned, constantly inflicting pain on it.

Xu Biao and Xie Lan combined their martial power into a golden spear, shining with a strong and highly dangerous aura, even Yan Xiaobao was convinced that he couldn't stop an attack of such magnitude. Determined there was no time left for him to toy with the little Blue Flame, he bit his teeth.

Raising his hands, a giant fireball above his head began moving. It didn't move quickly since it no longer produced smaller fireballs, increasing in size by the second. It slowly advanced towards the awakening Horned Snake.

Though the snake was large and deadly, it seemed to take eternity to react and wake. It had already noticed the formation expert and Zhou Long, completely aware of the third group right in front of it, but its great size was a disadvantage in such a battle. All it could do was hiss while slowly activating its cultivating base.

Yan Xiaobao was the first to notice the change. The once mud-green snake was changing color, turning a golden yellow. The golden hue even shone from its scales, leaving Yan Xiaobao without any destructive power.

More swiftly pushing the Blue Flame, Yan Xiaobao guided it into the beast's mouth, yet, when it reached the open cavity, the head began to move!

Every tremor was accompanied by a loud screeching sound. Yan Xiaobao and his friends struggled to maintain their balance, the worst being Sha Yun, as she merged with the earth, struck by a recoil, her face pale with internal pain. freewebove[c]om

The Horned Snake was a very smart beast, fully aware that among the many cultivators present, Zhou Long was the real trouble. It turned its face toward him, bringing the other eye directly in front of Yan Xiaobao.

Seeing such a perfect target, Yan Xiaobao didn't wait many seconds before commanding his flame to hit it; it sizzled in pain, and suddenly the world began to shake around them.

The Horned Snake raised its upper body above the ground, using all its might to smash down fiercely, aiming to crush some cultivators in the process.

Seeing the snake rise, Yan Xiaobao's eyes widened in fear, and he turned and shouted, "Retreat!" He rushed away, others following, but not everyone was lucky.

Little Poppy was too close, too slow, unable to survive. It was crushed by the gigantic snake, the flower's death severing the connection with Wang Julong, limiting her offensive capabilities.

"Wait in the back!" Yan Xiaobao shouted to Wang Julong, "We will definitely need your healing later!" He continued before the whole cavern collapsed from the giant snake's strike.

Seeing that the snake was awakening, Yan Xiaobao knew they didn't have much time left to linger. When he glanced at the right eye, the one hit by the Blue Flame, his face was evident in realizing that the Blue Flame still burned its eye and flesh, with intensity unmatched by other flames.

Returning to the original spot, with the beast's mouth open, Yan Xiaobao signaled to Xie Lan and Xu Biao, who threw the martial power spear with all their might, the spear passed through its back, lodged in the middle of its throat before the head.

The spear didn't pass completely through, but half of it pierced the tough scales, displaying just how powerful the spear truly was. Yan Xiaobao decided to attack with his own spear. Although he didn't

want to get close to the snake, he knew he had to attack with another fireball. His hands summoned a small flame, then withdrew Lan Feng's affinity with the fire, observing the flame change from red to light until it finally turned blue.

Without waiting a second, Yan Xiaobao fed the small Blue Flame with as much spiritual energy as possible, fully aware he would soon deplete his spiritual energy. Before he and his friends retreated, he still hoped to attack once more with a fireball.

While Yan Xiaobao focused on his fireball, Sha Yun was busy creating earth guardians, enabling all these beasts to have these kinds of injuries left by the Hui Clan and Deng Wu.

Deng Wu quickly summoned a soul shadow. While Necromancers rarely had many beast shadows, Deng Wu was not like this, as they had acquired thousands while waiting for the Dragon Army to appear in the tunnel. Now, they could finally be used.

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A single spirit beast's soul shadow could do little on its own, but as all the shadows fused together, they grew stronger and stronger until just one shadow remained, corroding the opponent's scales and flesh. Although the shadow took a long time to even corrode a small portion of the snake, these shadows were completely unaffected by anything the snake had done so far.

Just as Yan Xiaobao was about to launch his second blue fireball, a direct and perilous sensation surged through him, forcing him to retreat once more, leaping out of the snake's range.

It proved to be the right decision. Shortly after, a golden flash engulfed the area, followed by a blood-curdling scream emanating from the side where the terrain expert was located, and then came the tremors that rippled through the ground.

Screams rang out for only a few moments before everything fell into an eerie silence. Yan Xiaobao gritted his teeth and cast a glance at the place where Zhou Long was supposed to be fighting the snake. So far, Yan Xiaobao had received little help from any of the groups dispatched by the Dragon Army.

Realizing they couldn't count on assistance from any team, he desperately searched within his Dantian Cave for the Phoenix, but the Phoenix completely ignored him. No matter how much Yan Xiaobao tried to reach out to Lan Feng, the bird merely sat there with its eyes shut, emitting a golden radiance from within him.

Looking at Deng Wu, Yan Xiaobao noticed an ugly expression spreading across his face. The moment this once-handsome boy caught Yan Xiaobao's gaze, he shook his head. He too was unable to contact Little Dragon. It was as if both Divine Beasts had entered a trance-like state, unable to be roused or aware of anything happening around them.

As Xu Yue raised his hand, summoning the black blood and Qi dagger, he gazed at the snake, contemplating their best option for survival.

Seeing Yan Xiaobao draw his weapon, he was no longer alone. Behind him, Sha Yun stood with her halberd strapped to her back, Wang Julong holding her crimson staff, Deng Wu brandishing his sword, and the two experts from the Kings wielding their own weapons. Witnessing the determination in everyone's eyes, Yan Xiaobao nodded toward them. There was only one way to slay the snake, and that was by destroying the beast from within; its scales were simply too strong!

A faint bitter smile appeared on Yan Xiaobao's face as he saw everyone prepared to follow him, yet he still waved them off.

"I need you to cover my retreat," he shouted loudly, partially out of strategy but also due to concern. Yan Xiaobao knew that if they followed him into danger, he wouldn't be able to focus all his efforts on frightening the beast. Instead, he'd be preoccupied with the safety of his friends.

Although Yan Xiaobao had confidence in himself, he wasn't entirely sure if his risky plan would work. Even so, it was worth attempting. He could smell the scent of fresh blood and charred flesh lingering in the air.

The scent originated from the Horned Snake, as blue flames spread across its body. Unlike ordinary flames, these would continue to burn as long as the natural essence of heaven and earth existed where they ignited, or until the cultivator who created them ceased them. These were among the most dangerous flames one could encounter, outmatching even elemental flames. Elemental flames required five cultivators to create and constant surges of spiritual energy, infused with the elemental affinity of the cultivator controlling them.

The snake's side, the one scorched by Yan Xiaobao, was exposed to him. On that side, where its scales and flesh had been completely erased, its eyes had vanished entirely. Portions of it had been consumed by the beast's soul shadow, while the rest was obliterated by the blue flames.

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Yan Xiaobao stood nearby, noticing that the snake was paying no attention to him or his friends. When he looked to the other side, the geological experts showed no reaction either, but the smell of fresh blood rising around them made Yan Xiaobao even more vigilant.

Yan Xiaobao didn't mind that the Dragon Clan team had yet to take action, as he felt uneasy traveling with many so-called allies he couldn't trust. He knew these people were experienced warriors and Yan Xiaobao's friends, though they often fought amongst themselves and rarely faced truly formidable opponents, which put them at a slight disadvantage.

Despite being at a disadvantage himself, Yan Xiaobao's face revealed an excited smile. He took a deep breath and released the red fog from his Dantian Cave.

As it was released, an image flashed before Yan Xiaobao's eyes — the figure of a man with wild, unkempt hair. His skin was not human but striped like a tiger's. His eyes shone with a red glow, and behind the man was a long tail. An overwhelming killing intent erupted from this creature that was neither beast nor human. As the killing intent touched Yan Xiaobao, it suddenly took over his body, spreading violently and encompassing the entire area.

The arrival of this killing intent sent a shiver down even the Horned Snake's massive body. Zhou Long was stunned as he observed Yan Xiaobao facing off against an unstoppable opponent. Yan Xiaobao's killing intent had been fully released, with nothing to suppress it like the tranquil clouds from before.

When Yan Xiaobao felt his body start to change, a howl echoed through the valley. His muscles grew stronger and swelled to their limit.

His eyes were no longer serene and blue; instead, they burned red, filled with a chaotic, murderous intent. His canine teeth grew longer as feral growls emanated from him, and dark stripes began appearing on his skin.

Yan Xiaobao was aware of every transformation happening to him, but it felt like someone else had taken control of his body. The sensation was eerily similar to when Lan Feng had taken over his body, suppressing his consciousness and leaving him unable to act.

Seeing the Horned Snake before him, Yan Xiaobao felt his body lunge toward it, roaring with killing intent.

His hands transformed into claws, surging with a power unlike anything Yan Xiaobao had experienced before losing control of his body. This power didn't come from Qi, spiritual energy, or martial power. It was a black energy Yan Xiaobao had never felt before, and as it coursed through his meridians, his entire body was filled with astonishment.

Near the giant snake, Yan Xiaobao wanted to stop his body, but stopping was completely impossible. Instead, his body slammed into the snake with a crimson cloud. His claws, enhanced by the black energy, grew larger and sharper, wrapped in cutting edges.

The previously unyielding scales, which had seemed impossible to penetrate, now felt like butter. While the claws remained the same length, the black energy extended from them, piercing deeply into the snake's skin.

The Horned Snake, which had completely ignored Yan Xiaobao before, could no longer do so. A piercing hiss escaped from its wounded mouth. The entire world seemed to shake again as the snake struggled to free itself from Yan Xiaobao's new claws gripping its head.

The Horned Snake thrashed its head wildly, soon realizing that the creature clinging to it wasn't falling off. In desperation, it slammed itself fiercely against the mountainside that formed part of the valley.

Yan Xiaobao roared against the mountain wall, climbing into the beast's mouth. He chose to hide inside while clinging to a sharp fang as large as Hui Yue herself.

The snake's incessant thrashing created a cacophony of madness, its body smashing back and forth as it desperately tried to shake off Yan Xiaobao.

"Xu Biao!" "Xie Lan!" A loud roar boomed across the sky. "Zhou Long!" Upon hearing their names, the three of them snapped out of their daze.

Until now, the three had held back during the battle, waiting to see how Yan Xiaobao would handle the situation. But now, hearing their names and noticing how the entire mountainside was teetering, they quickly shook off their hesitation and prepared their attacks.

Golden light erupted from all three of them as they charged toward the beast. Xie Lan's golden light transformed into leaves — small, golden leaves. Yet Yan Xiaobao could sense just how dangerous these leaves were.

When they reached the snake, some of the golden leaves became sharp and sliced deeply into its flesh, while others rested on its scales until Xie Lan's spell activated, exploding in a massive burst of golden light.

The golden light emanating from Xu Biao transformed into flying daggers, all of which rained down on the Horned Snake, causing streams of blood to pour out.

Wu Wei only sought to create whatever he could imagine. As long as he had enough martial power to refine it, he could bring it to life.

However, Wu Wei was far more than just that, though that's all Phoenix would ever reveal to Yan Xiaobao, as she saw no need to explain further in detail.

Xu Biao and Xie Lan weren't the only ones attacking. Zhou Long finally joined the fray as well, his martial power taking the form of crescent-shaped blades. While Yan Xiaobao kept the Horned Snake occupied, Zhou Long wielded his crescent blade with all his might, the weapon streaking through the air like a guillotine and ultimately severing the snake's head.

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Yan Xiaobao, still conscious, began to worry about the effect the red fog controlling his body might have on him. Would it attack his friends again? Would it perhaps go after Zhou Long? However, as soon as Yan Xiaobao tried to resist, the red fog silently disappeared, allowing his body to return to normal, and his consciousness once again reclaimed control over himself.

To his astonishment, Yan Xiaobao looked down at his hands, but no matter what he did, his body now obeyed his commands. Nothing from the red fog seemed to disturb him deeply. Even the serene cloud within his Dantian Cave didn't require guidance—it simply rested docilely.

Yan Xiaobao stepped back, away from the decapitated head of the Horned Snake lying on the ground. Leaving the beast behind, he felt a surge of pride. It had been a long and grueling battle; when the snake began to thrash around, the entire formation of experts was slaughtered, yet Yan Xiaobao's friends all survived. This filled Zhou Long with a mix of excitement.

"You did well today," Zhou Long said, patting the white-haired boy's shoulder. He believed the intent to kill during the match was akin to bloodlust, but this time, it was malicious—even shocking Zhou Long. He became convinced that this young man was indeed connected to General Frozen, a rising master.

"I'll take the beast's core and horn," Zhou Long declared, as golden light flickered from his hand. He severed the horn cleanly and deftly extracted the beast's core.

"Once you've taken what you want from this creature, I need to return to the city. After that, come to the Dragon Company headquarters to find me. I'll be issuing a quest I've planned, but since you all helped me so much, I'll make sure to repay you."

With that, Zhou Long cast one last glance at the spot where the strata expert lay buried beneath rubble, then shot off into the distance without looking back.

"Alright then," Yan Xiaobao sighed in relief once Zhou Long disappeared into the distance. "Let's begin scavenging materials from this beast." The black blood suddenly shimmered in Yan Xiaobao's hands as he patiently began to strip its scales, removing them one by one from the serpent's massive body.

Although Yan Xiaobao wished to remove every valuable material from the snake, he soon realized it would be impossible to take everything. In the end, he shared all the fangs with Xu Biao. Everyone received some scales for free, while Yan Xiaobao managed to acquire thousands of scales. He devoured so much of the snake meat that it astonished people—he even stripped bones from beneath the protective layer of skin under the scales. Its skin was tough; while penetrable, it still offered considerable defense.

After gathering all the items, Hui Yue He carried them away, though Yan Xiaobao reluctantly had to leave behind the remaining materials. His storage stone had reached its capacity, leaving no room despite sounding like a blessing murmured in his companions' ears.

The journey back to Mercenary City took several days longer than the trip there because they were no longer following Zhou Long's frenzied pace. Instead, they traveled leisurely, stopping each night. Yan Xiaobao became thoroughly engrossed in refining the materials he had obtained from the giant snake.

Upon reaching Mercenary City, Yan Xiaobao and his companions headed to the Mercenary Guild, where they once again settled into a smaller courtyard.

Although Yan Xiaobao remembered they would need to visit Zhou Long soon, he tried to delay as much as possible. He refused to go anywhere until he finished refining the items and drying out the meat.

The primary reason Yan Xiaobao avoided Zhou Long was his persistent sense of unease regarding the man. During the battle, it was evident Zhou Long could have ended it sooner, but he let the beast wreak havoc for an extended period, even leaving most of the fighting to Yan Xiaobao—not to mention allowing the beast to kill formation experts and Little Poppy.

That man likely hoped to accomplish something through Yan Xiaobao's involvement. The white-haired boy didn't know what it was and felt unsettled that Zhou Long might have obtained whatever it was he desired.

On the one hand, Yan Xiaobao wished to stay far from the man. It was obvious Zhou Long was scheming...

On the other hand, Zhou Long represented a free ticket to the next tunnel. He was clearly connected to the Dragon Army headquarters, and following him into the tunnel would likely prove effortless.

In the end, Yan Xiaobao couldn't decide what to do. Ultimately, he realized there would be no harm in hearing Zhou Long's proposed quest. Setting his mind with a determined expression, Yan Xiaobao packed up all the finely-harvested materials, including the remnants of the Horned Snake and its bones, before heading toward the Dragon Army's office where Zhou Long had said he'd be waiting.

As Yan Xiaobao walked through the small town, he no longer wore his cloak. However, numerous eyes turned toward him nonetheless. Some stared at him because of his peculiar appearance, while others gazed at him in awe, recalling his performance during the competition. Although Yan Xiaobao hadn't won first place, he was already regarded as one of the city's prominent cultivators.

Yan Xiaobao began delving more deeply into cultivation, gradually understanding why Lan Feng had chosen this place as a training ground.

While King-ranked experts existed in the Demon Residence Cave, they were extremely rare; the majority were either Master or Grandmaster-ranked.

After making inquiries, Yan Xiaobao learned that in the next cave, most experts were ranked as Master practitioners, alongside some high-level specialists.

On average, two caves housed Duke-ranked specialists, while the final caves consistently contained experts of average rank or higher.

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This was, of course, discussing the main caves, and between them were smaller caves, varying in size. These caves were all fiefdoms, belonging to the nobles of the last few caves.

Upon realizing this, Yan Xiaobao understood that Zhou Long belonged to one of the main caves, but for some reason, he had pitiable cultivators in this small cave.

As he pondered the various caves, Yan Xiaobao suddenly found himself standing in front of the headquarters of the Dragon Army. Letting out a sigh, he pushed open the door and stepped inside, his eyes scanning the surroundings, discovering that everything had been abandoned.

Looking back at the building, Yan Xiaobao found that the headquarters was nothing like what he had anticipated. For some reason, he had expected something akin to a police station from his old world, but evidently, this was a lavish residence constructed for the Dragon Army, meant for their use whenever they lived in the city.

"Hello?" Yan Xiaobao called out while looking around, but no response came. Unsure of whether he should wait in the hall or leave the building, Yan Xiaobao didn't know what to do. However, before he could make a decision, the front door opened, and Zhou Long appeared in the doorway, smiling as usual.

"Ah, my dear friend Yan!" Zhou Long exclaimed with exaggerated arm gestures. Then, placing a hand on Yan Xiaobao's shoulder, he firmly guided him up the stairs and through various corridors until they reached a large room.

As they entered the interior, Yan Xiaobao's mouth hung slightly open in astonishment, captivated by the exquisite Azure Dragon carvings all around him. The four columns in the room were carved into sky-blue dragons, the windows adorned with dragon mosaics, and dragon statues perched at the corners of the room.

Although Yan Xiaobao referred to it as a room, it was actually a suite of three interconnected spaces. One room featured a luxurious bed, another served as a washroom, and the final room, where Yan Xiaobao now stood, was the office.

The office contained a large desk made of heavy wood and two chairs.

Zhou Long gestured for Yan Xiaobao to take a seat while he settled himself behind the desk. Zhou Long remained silent for a moment, though his gaze upon Yan Xiaobao was peculiar, impossible for Yan Xiaobao to describe. Zhou Long's face continued to carry a chilling, eerie smile—a friendly smile.

"I've had to stay in this cave for half a year," Zhou Long began, his eyes falling on the scattered Memory Stones and papers on the desk. "But I need to send some information to headquarters," he continued, picking up three Memory Stones and a package.

"These items have to be delivered to the Capital, but since I can't leave, I must rely on someone else to carry them for me," Zhou Long added, his tone tinged with a faint complaint about the task.

If there had been anyone else in the room apart from Yan Xiaobao, they would have immediately pointed out flaws in Zhou Long's logic. If Zhou Long had to remain in the cave for half a year, he could easily reach the final cave before Yan Xiaobao and his party—even if Zhou Long started his journey after the six months had passed.

The fact that Yan Xiaobao refrained from pointing this out reinforced Zhou Long's impression that Yan Xiaobao had hidden ties to General Frozen. The unspoken truth hinted that Yan Xiaobao was not from the Underworld.

Meanwhile, Yan Xiaobao felt fortunate. The truth was that they had been tasked with delivering items to the final cave, which would allow them access to every tunnel along the way. Upon hearing that Zhou Long had no intention of tracking them during their journey, Yan Xiaobao felt even more reassured. Zhou Long's obligation to remain in the cave for six months was a relief.

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Chapter 440: Mercenary Badge

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No matter how Yan Xiaobao thought about it, this was beneficial for them. He nodded, indicating that he accepted the task.

"That's fantastic!" Zhou Long said with an excited and joyful expression, "Hand me your Mercenary Badge." He continued, as Yan Xiaobao took out the golden badge from the Memory Stone, curious to see what would happen next.

Yan Xiaobao watched curiously as Zhou Long pressed the badge against his forehead. A wisp of blue light appeared, and Zhou Long handed it back to him.

Seeing Yan Xiaobao's confused expression, Zhou Long decided to explain: "Don't let Jinfeng fool you," he said with a laugh, "This is a Memory Stone, just like all other badges. What I just embedded into the stone were the details of your mission. This is a Dragon Army mission, recognized as an A-level task. I've upgraded you to B-level and even included your photo in your leadership profile."

Yan Xiaobao was stunned by what he heard. He squinted his eyes as these words made no sense to him.

"What is B-level?" he asked curiously.

"B-level means you have the authority to request assistance in every town, and they must obey you. The only people above you are each cave's leaders, as well as the officials and elders of the Dragon Clan. If they wish to oppose you, they had better have a damn good reason."

Hearing that he was granted such considerable authority, Yan Xiaobao swallowed lightly. Everything he had hoped for was now within his grasp, but it also proved Zhou Long was not an ordinary member of the Dragon Army. To be able to grant such an upgrade, he must hold significant power.

Although Yan Xiaobao still harbored doubts about Zhou Long's intentions, he expressed gratitude for the promotion, as the mission aligned perfectly with his goals. A genuine smile appeared on Yan Xiaobao's face, and he nodded in affirmation.

"We'll be leaving the town in a few days," Yan Xiaobao told Zhou Long, feeling that he should inform him of their plans. He thanked the elder and prepared to leave.

Seeing Yan Xiaobao intending to leave, Zhou Long didn't make any moves to stop him. He wasn't foolish—he was well aware that Yan Xiaobao didn't trust him. What made this even clearer was that Zhou Yue always acted cautiously when discussing Zhou Long, and the man knew it.

From the very beginning, he showed partiality to ensure Yan Xiaobao would notice. Even now, he would go to great lengths to demonstrate his degree of approval toward the young boy. While this was indeed a risky gamble, it was a way to guarantee Yan Xiaobao could remember him later. If Yan Xiaobao recalled Zhou Long as someone who had helped him, then Zhou Long's gamble would have paid off. Anyone who was useful to General Frozen would receive tremendous rewards. From the very beginning, he showed partiality to ensure Yan Xiaobao would notice. Even now, he would go to great lengths to demonstrate his degree of approval toward the young boy. While this was indeed a risky gamble, it was a way to guarantee Yan Xiaobao could remember him later. If Yan Xiaobao recalled Zhou Long as someone who had helped him, then Zhou Long's gamble would have paid off. Anyone who was useful to General Frozen would receive tremendous rewards.

Zhou Long sighed deeply, looking at the now-empty office, and leaned back. Picking up another batch of Memory Stones, a faint smile appeared on his face. Zhou Long pressed them against his forehead one by one, beginning to randomly select a group of mercenaries. As his hand rested on a poster that stated Yan Xiaobao was a wanted man, it noted that his companions were more valuable dead than alive.

Completely unaware of Zhou Long's decisions, Yan Xiaobao walked back to the courtyard, happily whistling. His handsome, youthful face radiated excitement.

Now that he had received the mission from Zhou Long, they no longer needed to worry about how to move from one location to another. All of Yan Xiaobao's previous concerns had vanished.

Though he still felt uncertain about Zhou Long, Yan Xiaobao knew they would soon escape his control. With the privileges he had just obtained, how could their path ahead be anything but smooth?

Overcome with excitement, Yan Xiaobao whistled eagerly, impatient to share the good news with his friends. He quickened his pace as he dashed through the town, eager to meet them as soon as possible.

"Are you going to provide information to the Dragon Army's headquarters?" Xu Biao asked, staring at the young man before him in astonishment.

Seeing the surprised expression on Xu Biao's face, Yan Xiaobao couldn't help but chuckle lightly. He nodded while revealing his Mercenary Badge.

Upon seeing the badge, Xu Biao carefully pressed it against his forehead. The iconic glow of the Memory Stone shimmered, enveloping everyone present. As he read the mission details, Xu Biao's eyes had already closed.

Unlike Yan Xiaobao, Xu Biao was highly aware of how Zhou Long could reach the final cave faster than Yan Xiaobao. Sending information via mercenaries was exceedingly rare, especially as these messages couldn't always be relied upon.

Keeping this in mind, Zhou Long had consistently displayed partiality toward Yan Xiaobao, as though he knew something about the young man that Xu Biao did not. The Guild Master contemplated this briefly, giving Yan Xiaobao a searching look, seemingly hoping that the young man Zhou Long had noticed would realize it as well.

After spending some time observing Yan Xiaobao, the white-haired youth felt uncomfortable under the scrutiny. The Guild Master finally sighed and gave up his effort.

"It seems like the mission is quite remarkable," Xu Biao said with a sigh as he returned the golden badge. However, the expression on his face showed he didn't entirely understand why Yan Xiaobao had been entrusted with such a mission.