

Medical 441

Chapter 441: Mercenary Badge_2

Seeing his expression, Yan Xiaobao somewhat understood Xu Biao's thoughts. Although the Guild Master hadn't said a word, the white-haired boy quickly realized that the mission wasn't as simple as he had anticipated.

Before Yan Xiaobao had a chance to ask any questions, Xu Biao fixated his gaze on him. He shook his head slightly, indicating this wasn't the place for conversation. Seeing his gesture, Yan Xiaobao refrained from saying more. Instead, he broke into a bright smile when he heard his friends' cheerful voices; everyone was excited about finally leaving Mercenary City.

Stepping aside, Yan Xiaobao gestured for Xu Biao to follow him, and the other man willingly complied.

"What do you think about this mission?" Yan Xiaobao asked in a very low voice, ensuring no one nearby could overhear their conversation.

Xu Biao scratched his head, giving a wry smile of helplessness as he replied, "What's your relationship with Zhou Long? To entrust you with such an important mission, he must see you as someone he's known for years and trusts unconditionally."

Hearing this, Yan Xiaobao nodded. Zhou Long treated him as if they were old friends, even though they hadn't known each other before. Did it remind Yan Xiaobao of someone he once knew?

Xu Biao and Yan Xiaobao fell into silence, each pondering why Zhou Long held such trust in him, yet neither could find an answer.

"So, what's your plan for now?" Xu Biao asked as he glanced at their friends drinking and feasting, playing around the bonfire in the middle of the courtyard. Smiling, Yan Xiaobao answered, "I don't think Zhou Long has any malicious intentions toward me." His words made sense to Xu Biao.

"If he wanted me dead, I would've been long gone," Yan Xiaobao continued. "But instead of killing me, he keeps orchestrating situations that benefit me."

"I think this mission is no different. He wants to control the way and the route I travel, but at the same time, he knows if we traveled together, I'd refuse the proposal." Xu Biao nodded in agreement upon hearing this.

"Have you noticed if I've been marked all along?" Xu Biao suddenly asked, his expression slightly awkward as he scratched his chin. "Ever since I've been enjoying a leisurely life in the Demon Residence Cave, I've postponed going to the Dragon Cave. I've been receiving an influx of travel orders lately, but I haven't gone. Maybe it would be more interesting if I could travel with you."

Before Xu Yue could respond, Xu Biao hastily clarified, and Yan Xiaobao couldn't help but chuckle as he considered the situation.

In the cave they were now in, Yan Xiaobao was considered a strong man, and in the previous caves, he had been the strongest. Yet, he realized he wouldn't be regarded as a powerhouse in the caves ahead. However, if his team included Yan Xiaobao's friends and two King-level experts, it would be far safer.

Dealing with the Dragon Army made the mission extremely lucrative for everyone involved. Though the Dragon Army was considered the most formidable force within the tunnel and cave system, other factions also existed.

While those factions hadn't directly clashed with the Dragon Army, they still had to spend enormous sums to obtain the information Yan Xiaobao carried, making the potentially profitable mission equally dangerous.

Currently, the only ones aware of the mission's details were Yan Xiaobao, Xu Biao, and Zhou Long. Including Xu Biao would ensure he couldn't sell the information. Although Xu Yue had a deep suspicion about what Xu Biao might do, the possibility still lingered.

Weighing all the pros and cons, Yan Xiaobao slowly nodded, saying, "Glad you can join us." He spoke in a low voice, his gaze falling on Deng Wu teasing Wang Julong at the campsite. As he thought about how Wang Julong had lost her cherished Little Poppy, whom she had spent so much time raising, a hint of sorrow appeared on his face.

Little Poppy had died a heroic death, inflicting significant damage on the Horned Snake's face. Sadly, its retreat had been too slow, but it departed in a blaze of glory.

After Zhou Long left the battlefield, Yan Xiaobao and his friends stayed behind to create a grave for the flower.

Wang Julong struggled deeply with the loss of her Little Poppy. But after some time, Deng Wu and Yan Xiaobao managed to crack her emotionless exterior, once again eliciting an awkward yet beautiful smile from her.

Seeing Wang Julong smile like that lifted the heaviness in Yan Xiaobao's heart, replacing it with a joyful feeling. It was as though his heart ached as much as Wang Julong's, yet for another reason entirely.

Watching Deng Wu successfully coax a faint smile from the still slightly melancholic Wang Julong, Yan Xiaobao couldn't resist smiling himself, his senses soothed as happiness shone in his eyes.

Xu Biao noticed the change in Yan Xiaobao's expression and glanced in the direction Yan Xiaobao was staring, his smile holding a knowing satisfaction.

Throughout the courtyard, laughter echoed. Blushing, Xu Yue pretended as though nothing had happened.

Their secret meeting was interrupted by the laughter, but they all knew they were comrades now. Sharing a mutual understanding in their eyes, they agreed to meet again the next day and finalize the details of their journey.

With shared laughter, Yan Xiaobao and Xu Biao returned to the ongoing gathering in their courtyard. Although everyone knew the two had been discussing important matters, no one asked any questions, instead accepting that they wouldn't be told until the time was right.

Walking to the bonfire in the center of the courtyard, Yan Xiaobao smiled as he grabbed a stick holding some roasting meat. Judging by its freshness, Yan Xiaobao instantly knew it wasn't his dried wolf meat or dried Horned Snake meat. Taking a small bite of the freshly grilled food with a hint of hazelnut flavor, he was pleasantly surprised.

Yan Xiaobao liked to save money. He never knew when he might need it, so he preferred eating dried meat whenever possible. Yet, the moment the tender meat melted in his mouth, bursting with flavor, the white-haired boy was utterly shocked. A satisfied and relaxed expression spread across his face.

It wasn't ordinary meat; it was magical beast meat, seasoned with medicinal herbs to relieve fatigue. Creating such a dish was something Wang Julong had longed to learn but had been unable to find a teacher for in Liluo City.

Seeing the meat before them, and with Xu Biao clearly not being the creator, Yan Xiaobao felt happier than ever. It meant Xie Lan, a cultivator with an affinity for wood, had likely prepared it, and she specialized in the very thing Wang Julong had hoped to study.

Xie Lan was a significant asset to Yan Xiaobao, and as he ate the delicious food, he couldn't help but whistle in appreciation. Later, he approached Sha Yun, who was chatting with Xie Lan and Xu Biao.

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"So we leave in three days," Xu Biao said, looking at Yan Xiaobao. Standing in Xu Biao's office, the older of the two busied himself packing items into a storage stone for the upcoming journey.

Yan Xiaobao nodded. Three days was the perfect amount of time. It allowed them to purchase whatever supplies they needed while providing adequate rest to prepare for their departure from the Demon Residence Cave. After all, they had only left Mercenary City to kill the Horned Snake; they were unfamiliar with the terrain beyond.

Gazing at the horizon and looking up at the sky, it was hard to believe this was merely a cave. Everything looked like it belonged above ground rather than being subterranean. Only upon closer inspection could one see the stone ceiling above the "sun" and the far-off cave walls enclosing this world, locking everything in as though it were a prison.

Yan Xiaobao fully understood why Xu Biao had grown weary of this world. Perhaps if Xu Biao continued assisting him through trouble, Yan Xiaobao would be willing to help this old man leave the Underworld someday. After all, friends help each other.

Standing up, Yan Xiaobao nodded at Xu Biao and then walked step by step toward the courtyard where all his friends were waiting, eager to overhear what they had been discussing.

Although they trusted Yan Xiaobao's judgment, their curiosity was hard to suppress. They had speculated about the conversation's content earlier, all hoping that Yan Xiaobao would invite Xu Biao to join them.

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Chapter 442: Expert Refinement

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Strictly speaking, they were wrong because Yan Xiaobao had not invited him to join, but Xu Biao suggested that once they heard the latter would accompany them, he would bring Xie Lan. The happiness was evident on their faces; everyone was ecstatic upon hearing the news. As Yan Xiaobao and his group walked through the fields outside Mercenary City, morning dew dripped off the plants. Three days passed quickly, and Yan Xiaobao spent his time refining more materials while his friends stocked up on essentials.

In this underworld, light stones were cheaper than in the surface world, so Wang Julong seized the opportunity to purchase them in bulk.

Before the group set out again, light stones were not the only items they purchased. They bought medicinal plants in large quantities, inscription paper, various scrolls, and simple memory stones.

Purchasing memory stones had become a simpler task since they were now able to use spiritual energy to refine them to the Master level. Now, cultivators could perfect the stones themselves.

Memory gems were small, black gemstone-like stones, as numerous as stars in the sky. These raw stones could only hold short messages or skill imprints, and these skills could only be used a few times before the stones broke.

It was these memory stones that Hui Le had bought back when he was selling Martial Arts in Liluo City.

All memory gems contained an inner pull, which could be activated by Qi. Once the pull was triggered, these stones captured whatever was directed into them—be it information, skills, or scenes occurring before them.

There were lower-tier stones and also middle-tier stones. These slightly refined gems could hold more extended information and retain Martial Arts Skills for a longer period. Depending on the size and purity of these gems, they could be further refined into storage gems.

The purity of a memory gem could be determined by its color and size. The darker it was, the purer it was.

Storage gems were highly pure memory gems meticulously refined to store information and even hold physical objects.

Above the middle-tier memory stones were high-tier memory stones. These were the purest gems, capable of holding vast amounts of items, substantial amounts of information, and long-duration recordings after advanced refinement.

These were the standard types of memory stones, but some had undergone special refinement for specific purposes, such as the student badges given out by Yan Xiaobao's academy.

These memory stones of the highest quality had been refined by experts devoted to creating memory stones for students. They recorded everything, acted as keys, and served as storage stones, allowing coins to be stored within them.

To date, the memory stones Yan Xiaobao had obtained at the academy were the most impressive upgrades he had ever seen, far beyond what he could refine himself.

Although Yan Xiaobao couldn't improve those memory stones, he was still skilled at making storage gems and high-tier memory stones, which led him to purchase a large number of unrefined gems of varying quality.

After acquiring all the necessary items, Hui Yue ordered the last two days to be devoted to cultivation. Although he knew Xu Biao and Xie Lan would be accompanying them, he couldn't help but dwell on how dangerous this mission could be.

Everyone understood his apprehension, and no one complained. The excitement about pressing onward grew amongst them all, and even Yan Xiaobao couldn't help but feel restless. By the third morning, the anticipation was almost overflowing.

On the third morning, the morning mist still hung in the air, but the small courtyard was bustling with activity. The sun had yet to rise above the horizon, but none of the young people could wait any longer. Even Yan Xiaobao, packing up everything that belonged to him in his room, wore a smile of excitement on his face.

Within minutes, everyone's belongings were packed, and they quickly gathered outside, waiting for Xu Biao and Xie Lan to arrive.

Yan Xiaobao sat down and began cultivating. Deng Wu found some paper and started drafting an inscription pattern. Wang Julong leaned against the wall of the house, while Sha Yun stood there impatiently, her tail flicking against the ground, displaying her current mood.

After what felt like an eternity, Xu Biao and Xie Lan finally appeared at the door. Both were surprised to see the group of four ready to set out, and Xu Biao gave a sheepish smile as he realized he had kept them waiting. Although everyone seemed busy with something, it was obvious their activities had merely been a way to pass the time.

Sensing Xu Biao entering the courtyard, Yan Xiaobao opened his eyes, smiled, and gracefully stood up, brushing the dust off his robe.

Not a word was said. Yan Xiaobao and Xu Biao exchanged nods, and then Yan Xiaobao gestured toward the exit with a wave of his hand.

As the sun rose before them, they finally began their journey, unveiling the world they were about to enter.

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"We've been here before," Yan Xiaobao sighed, pointing at a tree ahead. There was a deep engraving on its trunk.

Seeing the marking, everyone in the group froze, a trace of shock on each of their faces as they struggled to comprehend what had happened.

"This shouldn't be possible," Xu Pi'ao muttered, uncertain about what had just occurred. "We've been following the sun and heading west this whole time. How could we have ended up back where we started?"

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Back on the road, Yan Xiaobao and his friends were brimming with excitement once more as they walked along the dusty path leading to the Capital of the Demon Residence Cave, chatting cheerfully.

According to their estimates, they should have been able to reach the capital within a week, but unexpected events arose only three days after their departure.

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Yan Xiaobao and his friends were traveling when their path suddenly led into a massive forest. Xu Biao claimed that this forest wasn't part of the area they were familiar with.

"I'm certain," Xu Biao repeated, somewhat annoyed—not just because Hui Yue doubted him, but also because he himself struggled to believe it.

The usually straightforward road that should have been surrounded by farmland now directly cut through a rather dark and ancient forest, one that seemed to have thrived for centuries.

Seeing the road lead straight into the forest, Yan Xiaobao and Xu Biao decided to enter, but now it seemed like a terrible decision.

At first, upon entering the forest, they encountered the ruins of old cottages, swallowed by trees and the flora within the woods. Strangely, when someone examined these ruins, they didn't seem old—instead, they appeared well-maintained, with many items left inside the houses that seemed to have been used just days ago.

Despite discovering these well-maintained houses, Yan Xiaobao and his friends found nothing—no humans, no animals. What concerned the group most was not just the absence of life, but the fact that they hadn't even seen a single corpse, heightening their alertness and prompting them to decide to leave the forest immediately.

Unfortunately, leaving wasn't as easy as they'd hoped. Turning back along the road, they repeatedly found themselves back at the same ruins they were trying to leave.

Realizing they couldn't retrace their steps, Yan Xiaobao and Xu Biao decided to push forward. They quickly determined that walking the path ahead wouldn't guarantee them any success in escaping the forest, so they opted to head east, guided by the sun.

It was at this point that Yan Xiaobao and Xu Biao discovered that even when guided by the sun, they were unable to break past whatever force kept them trapped in the forest.

Yan Xiaobao sat on a giant boulder, closed his eyes for a moment in contemplation, and let out a deep sigh. The spot they were constantly brought back to was a small clearing with a faint stream of fresh water trickling through the forest floor, enticing them to drink.

None of them were foolish enough to try drinking the water, nor did they gather any food from the forest. Even the wood they used to set up their fireplace came from their own supplies.

"So, what do we do now?" Deng Wu asked, leaning against the same boulder Yan Xiaobao was sitting on, prompting the young man to open one eye and glance at the handsome, black-haired youth.

"We have a few options," Yan Xiaobao sighed. "First, I can attempt to use Qi Fan to carry all of us into the trees. Hopefully, we can find a way out that way."

"Another option would be to try walking in a direction we haven't attempted before, to see if it leads us somewhere new."

"The next choice is simply to try destroying the forest. If we start a dangerous fire, perhaps it'll force us out."

"The last option is to stay here," Yan Xiaobao finished, closing his eyes again and resuming his training, hoping to restore his Qi vortex to its peak state before moving forward with any plan they chose.

"What exactly is this Qi Fan?" Xu Biao asked, as he wasn't enthusiastic about the other ideas Yan Xiaobao had proposed.

"It's a Martial Arts Skill," Deng Wu explained. "It creates a fan of Qi that allows us to ride in the air."

Upon hearing about the possibility of flight, Xu Biao stared at Yan Xiaobao in awe. Flying was something they had long dreamed of while in the caves, yet finding a way to achieve it was extremely rare. As far as he knew, only one or two cultivators in the entire cave system were able to fly. The fact that Yan Xiaobao possessed such a skill, one that seemed as simple as other Martial Arts Skills, shocked Xu Biao even more.

It seemed Yan Xiaobao still had many secrets Xu Biao couldn't uncover—a thought that brought a sly smile to his face. After all, he hadn't revealed all his abilities to Yan Xiaobao either.

"Given our current situation, I suggest we try the Qi Fans," Xu Biao said with a grin. It was the best idea he could think of, and he couldn't suppress his excitement at the thought of flying.

Upon hearing Xu Biao's suggestion, Yan Xiaobao nodded in agreement, though he didn't open his eyes even once. Everyone guessed what Yan Xiaobao was doing, and as if they were of one mind, everyone sat down and began their own cultivation.

"Alright. Since there are so many of us, I won't be able to take everyone very far, but we should be able to get out quickly using this," Yan Xiaobao said as he created six similar Qi Fans, all lined up.

"Let's go," Yan Xiaobao said as he stood atop the central fan, while the others stood on their own Qi Fans. Seriousness was evident on all their faces, as they hoped this would be their best chance to escape the forest.

Yan Xiaobao wasted no time in spinning his Qi vortex, and his friends followed suit, flying into the air.

The Qi Fans proved reliable, and Yan Xiaobao knew he could sustain them for about an hour, maybe two, before needing to replenish his Qi vortex.

Ascending into the sky, Yan Xiaobao wielded two Qi Swords in his hands, forcibly cutting through vegetation in their path. Minutes later, they managed to break through the treetops, soaring above the endless forest.

As they flew above the forest, they cheered upon seeing its edge ahead. Yan Xiaobao immediately pointed towards it and raced in that direction as fast as possible on his Qi Fan.

After an hour of flying, the edge was closer than ever, but at the same time, Yan Xiaobao's Qi vortex was shrinking rapidly, leaving him nearly drained of Qi. This forced the six cultivators to descend to the ground.

They landed in extreme silence, anxiously worried they'd end up in the same clearing they had been trapped in. But after pushing through the thick vegetation, they found themselves in a different clearing. This prompted Deng Wu to clench his fists and yell, "Yes!"

Though Deng Wu was the only one to give voice to his feelings, everyone shared his sentiment, and relief was visible on all their faces.

"Let's spend the night here," Yan Xiaobao suggested in a weary voice as he began meditating. His completely depleted Qi vortex made him temporarily useless.

Seeing the exhaustion on Yan Xiaobao's face, everyone quickly agreed. They looked at his pale complexion as he entered deep meditation.

The mood tonight was much better than the past few days, as they finally glimpsed a way out of the strange forest.

"This is too strange," Deng Wu suddenly said as he chewed on a piece of dried food by the campfire. "We've seen houses in ruins, not to mention we're on what was once one of the busiest roads in the entire cave system, yet somehow, we haven't seen a single trace of life."

Looking at the towering trees before him, an eerie silence enveloped the atmosphere. The only sound they could hear came from the campfire. There were no birds singing or other forest creatures stirring. Reflecting on it, they realized they hadn't heard any sound since entering the forest. It was as though they were the only living beings in this strange place.

The chilling silence hung over them like a heavy blanket, casting a pall over the mood. They remained on high alert, ready to fight at a moment's notice.

Today was the first day they had a glimmer of hope for escaping the dreadful forest, which filled them with excitement and joy. Even so, they kept a wary eye on their surroundings, with none daring to let their guard down.

As everyone busied themselves with their tasks, the night passed quickly. All of them stayed close to Yan Xiaobao, providing as much protection as possible. Over the following days, everyone relied on Yan Xiaobao's Qi Fan to lead them out of the forest, making his cultivation their top priority.

After a half-day of cultivation, Yan Xiaobao once again managed to refill his Qi vortex, enabling them to leave.

Despite the possibility of leaving, the sun was already descending in the western sky, and the moon was rising. Yan Xiaobao decided to rest for the night before setting off again.

The next morning, as the sun rose in the east, the eerie silence continued. No birds could be heard in the sky, nor snakes sliding across the ground. No matter how hard they strained their ears, no sound could be heard—aside from the voices of Yan Xiaobao and his friends.

With renewed vigor, Yan Xiaobao created six Qi Fans, and he and his friends leapt onto them. Their belongings were neatly stored in their Memory Stones, and with a wave of Yan Xiaobao's hand, they soared into the sky, cutting through the treetops.

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Chapter 444: The Desperate Group

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When they managed to get past the trees, their excited expressions quickly turned sour. They realized they were in the exact same place as when they set off the previous day. As they wondered what other options they had, they remained motionless—even the faintest, most desperate in their group unwilling to act rashly.

"We can always try to see if flying gets us somewhere different this time," Yan Xiaobao sighed, seeing their exhaustion from yet another night spent retracing their steps in vain.

"Yes," Xu Biao nodded, though the doubt on his face was something Yan Xiaobao immediately noticed. Since Xu Biao wasn't ready to elaborate, Yan Xiaobao didn't press further. Instead, he began walking toward the distant edge of the forest that was faintly visible.

The group traveled in silence that day; the repeated failures of their attempts to escape weighed heavily on everyone, leaving them dispirited. Their strategy had failed, and once again, they were unable to leave the forest.

The only sounds to be heard were the gasps of Yan Xiaobao as he pushed himself to his limits, moving as swiftly as he could through the dense woods. He dashed towards the forest's edge, clinging to the hope that he might escape.

In his struggle to break through his physical limits, Yan Xiaobao's face grew increasingly pale, his skin ashen, his vision blurred, and his breathing ragged. After nearly three hours of relentless flight, he was completely unable to go on—even though the edge of the forest was right within sight.

Disheartened, Yan Xiaobao clenched his jaw tightly and gradually guided the six Qi fans to the ground. When he landed on a clearing identical to the one they had seen earlier that day, frustration was clear in his eyes. It was the exact same spot.

As they touched down, Yan Xiaobao stumbled toward a sturdy tree, sweat streaming down his body. This cursed forest made it excruciatingly difficult for him to hold onto any optimism.

As the others began setting up camp once more, none of them dared to speak to Yan Xiaobao. There was nothing they could say to lift his spirits. In a burst of anger, Yan Xiaobao struck the trunk of the tree with all his strength, wincing slightly at the sharp pain in his hand. It was as though the forest resisted every action he took.

Taking a deep breath, Yan Xiaobao walked toward the nearby creek. Though he didn't dare drink the water, he still felt the need to wash up, and the running water seemed perfect.

Xu Biao hesitated for a moment before following Yan Xiaobao's actions. "I think I know what this is," he said in a quiet voice, so soft that even those nearby couldn't hear him clearly.

"It's an illusion," Xu Biao murmured. "There was a group of mercenaries who frequently took on assassination contracts and the like. They've been around for a very long time, so I think they must have perished during their final task."

Hearing this, Yan Xiaobao frowned but continued splashing cold water on his face. The chill helped clear his mind.

"Mercenaries?" Yan Xiaobao muttered as he glanced around. Everything about the forest felt almost tangibly real, not like an illusion. Yet, the thought of how they were trapped here made him unable to dismiss Xu Biao's theory. At the very least, this was no ordinary forest.

"If it was them," Yan Xiaobao said with a furrowed brow, "do you know how we can break free from this illusion?"

In response, Xu Biao gave him a bitter smile and shook his head. "So far, I haven't heard of anyone escaping. The moment we rest, we're forced to start over from scratch. Unless we're able to make it outside all at once, I'm afraid we'll remain trapped here for a long, long time."

"With my current cultivation, I don't have the strength to get us out," Yan Xiaobao sighed as he quietly contemplated his options. After a moment of silence, his eyes suddenly lit up with a smile. He reached for a Memory Stone that held the Immortal Flower—a remarkable treasure he had acquired from the tunnels between the Demon Residence Cave and its labyrinthine depths.

Whistling softly to gather everyone's attention, Yan Xiaobao held up the flower, prompting the group to crowd around him.

"We need to get out of the forest all at once," Yan Xiaobao said with a sigh, "but my current abilities aren't enough to make that flight."

"However, we still have one chance," he continued. "It'll require me to absorb this Holy Flower. Even then, I cannot guarantee I'll have the strength to get us out of this forest."

Hearing this, the others exchanged glances, but a spark of hope reignited in their eyes. None of them showed even a hint of greed over the flower. Instead, they all nodded quickly, their faces breaking into smiles.

Yan Xiaobao remembered the last time he consumed a Holy Flower—it had propelled his cultivation forward in leaps and bounds. However, this particular flower was different.

The previous flower had aged significantly, refined through Wu Wei and primarily using spiritual energy to cultivate golden energy that Yan Xiaobao hadn't been able to fully utilize. But this flower, the one in his hands now, refined pure spiritual energy. It radiated a stunning silver glow, with excess spiritual energy dripping off its stem, forming shimmering streams of light.

As he stared at the flower, Yan Xiaobao couldn't help but swallow reflexively several times before finally placing the flower into his mouth. He noted how it slowly dissolved into liquid, trickling gently down his throat.

As the liquid touched his throat, it began dissipating, flooding his body with energy. It surged through his veins and blood vessels, coursing through every meridian and Dantian within him.

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As the silver energy began to pass through Yan Xiaobao's body, a surge of silver light erupted from the young man meditating in stillness. His eyes remained closed, his brows tightly knit as he focused on the new energy.

Once he identified the patterns of this energy, he spun his cultivation base with his spiritual energy, gathering the unrestrained energy entering through his mouth, derived from the Holy Flower.

The Holy Flower he had consumed earlier was entirely different from the one Yan Xiaobao just ingested. While the former was older and more refined, the energy it produced was like that of Wu Wei, capable of refining golden energy so potent it could elevate someone to a King, skipping over several stars in rank.

However, for Yan Xiaobao, no such leap occurred. He was unable to refine or fully control most of the martial power and spiritual energy within him. However, Lan Feng had already absorbed as much as he could.

Now, thanks to the Holy Flower, Yan Xiaobao once again saw an opportunity to advance within the team. This time, he could utilize every drop of the silver liquid, not to mention the Qi Line.

When the central Dantian was already open, increasing one's Qi vortex became a Herculean task, as all the Qi would need to be used to refine spiritual energy. Yet, Yan Xiaobao gambled that the added Qi would last long enough for him to refine it properly.

With Yan Xiaobao spinning his cultivation base to its utmost limit, channeling his spiritual energy and Qi Line through his body to capture and bring the new energy back to his Dantian Cave and spiritual energy sea, his body radiated a silver sheen.

As waves of energy surged through the two Dantian People, Yan Xiaobao could feel the fusion of oceans within him. The foreign spiritual energy was transforming into his own, causing his cultivation base to surge upwards.

As Yan Xiaobao glowed with silver light, the young man opened his eyes, their silver glow flickering from within.

This glow was different from Sha Yun's—it was pure energy, as his entire body brimmed with spiritual energy and Qi.

Without saying a word, Yan Xiaobao quickly conjured six Qi Fans. His whole body was now drenched in sweat. This flower was indeed younger and less potent than the previous one, but for Yan Xiaobao, it was the most beneficial flower he could currently obtain. While controlling the Qi Fans, he continued channeling more and more Qi and spiritual energy into his two Dantian Caves, as silvery vapor rose from his skin and beads of sweat streamed down his face.

Seeing the energy radiating out of Yan Xiaobao, everyone leapt onto a Qi Fan, taking to the skies at a speed far greater than before. It wasn't about conserving Qi now; it was a race against time. He was trying to escape the forest, then refine his newly acquired Qi Essence into spiritual energy.

Flying above the tree canopy, they encountered the same scenery as the day before, as well as the day prior to that. But this time, they held genuine hope they could escape the illusion.

This was an illusion designed to trap people. According to Xu Biao, it was one of the finest in the entire temple. Escaping it required either immense power or extraordinary speed.

Two hours into their flight, Yan Xiaobao's cultivation base reached the ninth star of the Master level. He had finally caught up to Deng Wu—achieving this with just one flower!

His cultivation base, having suddenly advanced, was far less stable than in the past. However, given their current predicament, the Hui Clan had no time to worry about the stability of his cultivation base.

Slightly leaning forward, his face once again turned pale, the earlier sweat now streaming like rivulets. His clenched teeth and fists reflected the resolve with which he urged himself to move faster.

Three hours passed as Yan Xiaobao kept the Qi Fans moving at the same speed as when they had set off. The Qi Water he had extracted from the flower was already depleted, leaving him once again reliant on his Qi vortex.

Four hours passed, and Yan Xiaobao was nearly at the brink of exhaustion. Yet, he could see the forest's edge drawing closer—so close he could almost reach out and touch it.

Four and a half hours after setting off, Yan Xiaobao finally released the Qi Fans, allowing them to fade away. The group planted their feet on the path they had traversed days ago, in an area where the forest had suddenly emerged.

As they landed, Yan Xiaobao was about to sit and recollect himself, the fatigue on his face evident. However, he couldn't afford such luxuries, as twenty figures stood in their path. Each of them wore mismatched armor and carried weapons that were clearly scavenged from their previous victims.

"Well, if it isn't Guild Master Xu," one of the men said with a malicious smile that conveyed no warmth, but rather a rabid ferocity. "What brings the esteemed Guild Master into our midst?" he asked, though his expression suggested he already knew that Xu Biao was traveling with this group.

"Why did you use the Endless Forest illusion to trap us?" Xu Biao demanded, his tone lofty as he stared down at the mercenaries before him—mercenaries who were supposed to be his employees.

"Don't take it the wrong way," the man replied from the front, still grinning as he gripped the Wolf Fang Club in his hand. "We're just conducting business, that's all. Our current assignment is to block your path, and ideally, reduce the numbers in your little party."

Chapter 446: A Group in Despair_3

Hearing this news, Xu Biao's face showed a serious expression, but it was quickly replaced by laughter. The older man laughed so heartily that he ended up wiping tears from the corners of his eyes.

"Of course," he said while laughing, "you forgot one thing," Xu Biao continued, still laughing as golden energy erupted from his body, summoning a protective barrier around him. "I might not accept the mission, but do you really believe they would hand over my entire branch to the Mercenary Guild? Can't I handle ordinary King-level experts?"

An air of arrogance surrounded him, and as he sneered at the man before him, Xu Biao's face took on a haughty expression.

Seeing the arrogance on Xu Biao's face, the man with the hammer also burst into loud laughter and then lifted the nail head hammer above his head. As Meis was raised, thunderous cheers erupted for their leader.

Hearing the cheers, everyone should have felt alarmed, but Xu Biao's face showed none of that emotion. Instead, there was a trace of awkwardness visible.

"Do you take me for a fool who would fall so easily for something as simple as an illusionary trick?" he sighed while scratching his head. "And as if that wasn't enough, who would've thought I had to be rescued by someone? Not even a King Ranking Expert. Just a lowly Master-ranking guy saving me and my subordinates. Do you realize how embarrassing that is?"

Hearing Xu Biao's words, the man with the Wolf Fang Club looked at him perplexed, as if he didn't recognize the man standing before him. The golden radiance spilling from Xu Biao was breathtakingly domineering. While the man with the nail head hammer was a formidable King-level expert, he was far from the pinnacle of the King-level like Xu Biao was.

"Xie Lan, stand aside and ensure Yan Xiaobao remains unharmed," Xu Biao suddenly shouted an order. The woman accompanying him nodded, stepping next to Yan Xiaobao as golden light shimmered from her hands, enveloping her body in an ethereal aura that accentuated her striking beauty.

"Deng Wu, take care of all the small fries with Sha Yun. Wang Julong, assist anyone who needs it. I'll handle this one myself."

As Xu Biao issued these commands, a mix of emotions appeared on the faces of Yan Xiaobao's companions, but after a few seconds of contemplation, all of them nodded in agreement. This was their best course of action.

The cultivators Xu Biao had referred to as "small fries," whether Master-ranked or lower, prompted Deng Wu to flash a wry smile. With a glance back, Deng Wu noticed Yan Xiaobao entering meditation, sitting beside Xie Lan. His face was entirely blank, fully focused on his meditation.

Seeing this, Deng Wu let out a faint humph but felt a deep sense of relief. Yan Xiaobao had truly pushed himself to his limits, forcing his body to persevere until he had safely led them out of the illusion. Letting him sit down to meditate was something they all felt he had earned.

The golden light surrounding Xu Biao had been surging for a while, and as the Guild Master raised his arm, the golden energy around him coalesced into the shape of a massive golden arm, extending his power into a tangible martial force.

In combat, martial power was the most formidable energy. Wu Wei was an energy capable of forming anything from within. Unlike Martial Arts Skills, it didn't require practitioners to learn specific techniques or activate Qi in predefined patterns within their meridians.

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Chapter 447: The Final Gunfight

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On the contrary, Wu Wei can be shaped into any form or figure desired by its creator, allowing quicker transformations while imposing no limits on what they wish to create. The only constraint is the number of Wu Wei they can control.

The golden arm created by Wu Wei was now three meters long, with a palm spanning one and a half meters.

The golden arm and palm rose above Xu Biao's head and began slowly descending toward the man wielding magic and his followers. The pressure multiplied several times over, making it feel as though the palm wasn't just descending on the men but compressing the air itself, effectively doubling the pressure weighing down on them. Before long, the first group of people started collapsing onto the ground.

Seeing this, the man with the nail head hammer wore a serious expression. Golden energy then erupted from his hands, forming a protective barrier around himself and his followers.

After shielding his subordinates, the man used even more martial power to create another object. This time, it was a golden spear, which he hurled toward the massive hand.

The spear pierced through the hand. Xu Biao clenched his teeth tightly, his face slightly paler than before, yet the hand continued its descent. As more and more "small fry" collapsed onto the ground, the pressure only grew more intense.

One person forced himself to remain standing, but in the end, his leg bones fractured. The others were not as strong. Unable to withstand the crushing pressure, they collapsed instantly.

Noticing that the barrier was ineffective, the golden energy used to create it gathered in the man's hand gripping the Wolf Fang Club, and his weapon suddenly enlarged, transforming into a golden hue. Moments later, the nail head hammer grew to the same size as Xu Biao's golden arm. The man gritted his teeth, his eyes gleaming fiercely, as he swung the massive golden hammer down onto the golden arm and hand, forcing Xu Biao to stagger backward and spit out blood.

Staggering, Xu Biao spat out fresh blood from his mouth. The massive hand was utterly destroyed by the Wolf Fang Club, but Xu Biao was not the only one gravely harmed in the final exchange.

The enormous Wolf Fang Club vanished, leaving the man drenched in sweat, a small drop of blood trickling from the corner of his mouth.

The shock and hostility in their gazes were evident as they stared at each other. Neither had anticipated the other being so powerful, but now, gritting their teeth, they had no choice but to go all out.

While the two continued fighting, Deng Wu, Sha Yun, and Wang Julong stayed back. They all understood that if they charged forward recklessly like the "small fry," they were likely to get caught up in Wu Wei's attacks and meet meaningless deaths.

Although Xu Biao lost the advantage in the previous exchange, the other side had suffered losses in manpower, as the supporting members of the mercenary group had been heavily affected by the pressure. Many had lost consciousness, while others sustained internal injuries. Xu Biao had performed brilliantly in his initial assault.

Observing the ground carefully, one could see how it had caved inward. A massive palm-shaped imprint was visible on the dusty road, where various cultivators sprawled in disarray—some injured and others rousing unconscious comrades.

A group of about seven men managed to retreat quickly, escaping the overwhelming pressure emanating from the palm.

Seeing them manage to escape, Deng Wu and Sha Yun hesitated but prepared to attack the seven. Sha Yun, not one for patience, suddenly charged forward toward them. She successfully struck down two experts ranked among the battle kings, venting her fury on the seven startled men.

Sha Yun seized her chance. Her tail slid through the air around a Master's neck, coiling tightly and severing his head from his body.

Blood sprayed from the neck onto the dusty road below. As the remaining six men reeled from the swiftness of the attack, Sha Yun activated her Earth Spirit Assault. It injured two more men this time, but none were killed.

"Useless beast!" Deng Wu sneered as he watched Sha Yun recklessly charge at the enemies, knowing that if she suffered any severe injuries, Yan Xiaobao would later hold him responsible. Deng Wu followed up the attack, slapping his storage stone and pulling out one inscription scroll after another.

Noticing Xu Biao and the man wielding magic gathering their remaining forces, Deng Wu activated two inscription scrolls by injecting a small drop of spiritual energy into each. Within seconds, two of Yan Xiaobao's red Fireballs materialized in Deng Wu's palms.

He hurled the Fireballs toward the man wielding magic, slightly disrupting the activation of his martial power. This gave Xu Biao another chance to regain the upper hand, a satisfied smile appearing on his face. Xu Biao focused on using the small advantage Deng Wu had provided to quickly gather his martial power, hoping to swiftly end this battle.

Jumping into the fray, Deng Wu attacked ferociously, mirroring Sha Yun's earlier assault. From the very beginning, he unleashed a relentless barrage of Fireballs, which rained down on the six experts like fiery meteors. Meanwhile, they had to constantly watch the ground as well, for Sha Yun began summoning Earth Spears that prevented the six cultivators from gaining stable footing to launch a counterattack.

Deng Wu had painstakingly spent day after day inscribing symbols and patterns. After completing as many as possible, he seamlessly fused them with his elemental attacks, enabling him to unleash strikes that took hours of preparation within seconds of thought.

Chapter 448: The Final Gunfight_2

Through his elemental fusion, the connection between Deng Wu's abilities, his soul shadow, and himself had grown even stronger, allowing the soul shadow to enhance its capabilities as their power increased.

After the fireball streaked across the sky and erupted into flames, and as the earth shook with spears piercing from the ground, Deng Wu and Sha Yun worked swiftly to render the cultivators incapable of combat, leaving them gravely burned or with crippled legs destroyed beyond repair.

From as far a distance as possible, killing the opposing cultivators proved far more challenging than injuring them, but the goal was never to kill indiscriminately, only to ensure no one would interrupt Yan Xiaobao. Once his cultivation was complete, he would decide how to deal with the survivors.

That was the original plan Deng Wu had explained to Sha Yun. However, Sha Yun, though she appeared human, was in truth a magical beast — and magical beasts did not allow their prey to escape alive.

Sha Yun would occasionally dart in and kill with brutal efficiency, and rare was the time she failed. After eliminating four of the men and leaving only two, Deng Wu eventually stopped hurling fireballs, knowing that it was only a matter of time before these last two met their end.

While all this took merely moments, those moments were enough for Deng Wu and Sha Yun to completely suppress their adversaries.

The battle did not belong to the magical beast and human pair alone; Xu Biao also joined in. Unlike the last time, his weapon was neither a massive arm nor a crushing palm but instead tiny golden needles. They appeared in his hands, and as he threw them, they moved faster than the eye could follow, each one aiming straight for lethal points.

Had it been just one or two needles, the mage wielding the colossal nail head hammer could have easily fended them off. However, it was a veritable sea of needles, all imbued with Wu Wei's intent to pierce anything that stood in their path.

A thin, golden barrier materialized in front of the mage, only to shatter into thousands of gleaming pieces with a sharp crack. While four or five needles were blocked, the rest struck true. Blood-curdling screams filled the air as the needles found their mark.

The agonized cry jerked Yan Xiaobao out of his meditation. It also captured the attention of both Sha Yun and Deng Wu, drawing their gazes to the kneeling man clutching at his chest and throat as blood poured forth. The needles dissipated into nothingness as the mage died with one final scream.

With everyone's focus locked on the crumpled corpse, the two remaining men, shaking with disbelief, seized their chance and fled as fast as their legs could carry them, not daring to linger even a moment longer.

Watching the men retreat, Yan Xiaobao sighed but stayed silent. He could already imagine them scrambling to recount the details of their failed mission to their employer.

Despite the slight instability of his cultivation base, Yan Xiaobao managed to completely absorb the Holy Flower, though he could not yet afford the luxury of testing his newfound strength in action.

"Clean up here," Xu Biao instructed, sitting down heavily. He was visibly injured after the battle. Upon seeing his wounds, Wang Julong and Xie Lan hurried over, using their healing abilities to tend to him.

Xie Lan was by far the more efficient of the two, though Wang Julong gave it her all. As a reward, she had been receiving guidance from the elder Xie Lan, who taught her methods to make her healing even more effective.

Deng Wu sighed as he glanced down at the ravaged battleground. A look of frustration crossed his face as he thought of how many inscription scrolls he had used. Though not too difficult to make, creating them still required time and energy, and having expended fifty to sixty in this fight, the cost was evident in his expression.

The sight of the scorched remnants left behind by his fireballs seemed too painful to dwell on. Turning away, Deng Wu approached Yan Xiaobao, who was now stretching his body, looking much better after emerging from the endless illusion of the forest.

Sha Yun eyed the retreating men but decided to stay where she was, prioritizing Yan Xiaobao's safety over finishing off the fleeing enemies. Protecting him was far more crucial than claiming two more lives.

Yan Xiaobao walked over to the King-level expert Xu Biao had killed, nudging the corpse with his foot until it rolled over, exposing its features.

Hui Yu furrowed his brow as he noticed the numerous holes that pierced the man's body, many clustered mere centimeters apart. Seeing how deeply they had penetrated, delivering such a decisive end, Yan Xiaobao couldn't help but feel a mix of awe and shock at Wu Wei's capabilities. After all, this was his first time witnessing them up close.

Gazing at the corpses scattered around him, Yan Xiaobao finally recognized that while he might hold his own against the cultivators of Duke University, he was utterly outmatched by the smallest shred of power wielded by a King-level expert.

Yan Xiaobao shook his head with a bitter smile, gathering all the Memory Stones he could find and storing them in his personal storage stone for later examination. He then conjured a fireball, incinerating the body until nothing remained but a smoldering odor of flesh and a small pile of ash.

He repeated the process with each body, and soon the sickening stench of charred remains became overwhelming, even causing Yan Xiaobao to wrinkle his nose.

It wasn't long before Yan Xiaobao finished burning the last corpse. Xu Biao had risen to his feet once more by this time, looking much improved, though his complexion remained slightly pale.

Xu Biao wasn't the only one looking pale; Xie Lan and Wang Julong also appeared somewhat gray-faced, but neither was hurt. The group was prepared to continue onward to Demon Cave City.

Standing side by side, Yan Xiaobao and Xu Biao surveyed the ashen ground and shattered terrain that bore witness to their clash.

The road was completely destroyed, with jagged Earthen Spears still protruding in places, and large hand-shaped craters pressed into the ground. Observers could easily deduce that a violent battle had taken place here. After ensuring nothing was left behind, Yan Xiaobao and the group resumed their journey.

"Only one person knows about your mission," Xu Biao said calmly. Yan Xiaobao sighed, nodding. "Yes," he replied, "the only one who knows is Zhou Long."

"Do you think it was him?" Xu Biao asked curiously. Yan Xiaobao nodded again without hesitation. "I think this was part of what he planned for us. Considering the level of experts sent against us, I have little doubt he hoped we would meet our end."

Hearing that, Xu Biao couldn't help but nod in agreement. Although their group of mercenaries was fairly renowned, it was clear they were no match for the experts accompanying Yan Xiaobao. If Zhou Long had no intention to kill them, then what was his plan? Xu Biao's mind churned with unease at the thought. With the bodies burned and the road ahead clear, Yan Xiaobao's group pressed forward toward the Capital. The tension of recent events sparked a heightened vigilance among them, expecting further attacks at any moment. Suspicion marred their interactions with anyone they encountered along the way.

Walking down the dusty road step by step toward the Capital, the group traveled for six long days. With the sun setting at the edge of the horizon, they finally spied the distant city.

The sight of the Capital rekindled energy in every member of the group. The city held the promise of proper beds to sleep in, warm baths, and real meals cooked by skilled chefs — luxuries that travel food could never rival.

"Tomorrow," Xu Biao said, a note of yearning in his voice as his eyes lit up at the sight of the city walls, "Tomorrow we'll be back in a real city!"

Those words at dusk lifted everyone's spirits. It had been so long since they'd felt such excitement. As the group resumed their march toward the distant city, lively conversation and laughter rose among them.

When night fell and the moon hung high, the group finally stopped to set up camp. Each member completed their tasks like clockwork, helping to pitch tents and prepare a meal. The air was no longer heavy with tension but instead filled with a cheerful and lighthearted mood.

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Chapter 449: The Power of Profound Surprise

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"It seems we've overthought the situation," Xu Biao said with a smile, watching Yan Xiaobao enjoying the Horned Snake Soup that Sha Yun had cooked for them.

After finishing his meal and clearing the dishes, Yan Xiaobao sat on a large boulder. Soon, the sound of snoring filled the campsite as he rested his head on his palm, legs crossed. The thought of fighting against mercenaries lingered in his mind. Though lost in meditation throughout the battle, he had witnessed the leader's final moments and the astonishing power that Xu Biao had unleashed.

He was acutely aware of his own weakness. Experts who managed to unlock the upper-level Dantian were rare, yet even a King-level expert could easily reduce Yan Xiaobao and his friends to nothing but ashes, as they'd experienced earlier.

Deng Wu and himself were the strongest in their team, yet neither was anywhere near King-level strength. Yan Xiaobao was contemplating ways to increase his own power—a kind of growth that would enable him to protect those he cared about.

From dusk till dawn, he sat deep in thought, not moving a single muscle the whole night. Instead, his mind churned over the options he could pursue. Sadly, none seemed viable. The only ways to genuinely augment his strength were either borrowing martial power from Lan Wei's merged soul or allowing Phoenix to take over his body and defeat his opponents.

"Have you been sitting like this all night?" A sweet voice came from behind him. The thoughtful young man turned around, only to meet Wang Julong's smiling gaze.

Her long hair fell loose, shimmering beautifully in the early sunlight. As the young mistress of the Wang Family, her skin was no longer pale from a previously sheltered life. Its warm tone now revealed someone who spent every day outdoors. Her rare smile graced her stunning face, leaving Yan Xiaobao utterly astonished by her exquisite beauty.

Shaking his head, he vaguely recalled her earlier question. He jumped down from the boulder, a slight smile appearing on his face.

"I needed to do some thinking," he responded, walking toward the beautiful girl without realizing what he was doing. His hand lightly brushed aside a stray lock of hair cascading over her lovely face.

As he touched her, Wang Julong blushed vividly. Instinctively, she stepped back a few paces, her mouth opening in wordless speech, unable to utter a single word.

"Sorry." Feeling a bit guilty when he saw the flustered look on the beautiful girl's face, Yan Xiaobao offered an apologetic smile. Somehow, he suddenly felt an urge to tease her—her rosy cheeks were just too charming. "I couldn't help it; being this cute in the morning is entirely your fault," he remarked with a shameless grin. Wang Julong's eyes widened as she found herself stammering, "I... I... I also need to... uh..." Before she could finish her sentence, the young woman turned abruptly and rushed back to her tent, leaving behind a mischievous smile on the young man's face.

The rest of the camp gradually woke up, both beasts and Humans alike surprised to see Yan Xiaobao's cheerful smile. They wondered what might have happened overnight to put him in such a good mood.

As morning began, everyone started packing up their tents—except for one tent, which remained suspiciously still throughout the morning. Wang Julong had yet to emerge, an odd occurrence indeed.

Everyone was puzzled by the situation. Wang Julong was usually very diligent, always waking before others and being the first to pack her tent. Seeing the young lady remain in her tent this morning, everyone—except Yan Xiaobao—wondered whether their serious friend might be unwell. After waiting for most of the morning, Xie Lan finally climbed into her tent to check what was wrong.

After a short while, Xie Lan emerged with a flushed face, glancing sharply at Yan Xiaobao. Her expression caused the young man to raise an eyebrow in amusement, his shameless grin growing wider as Xie Lan took a deep breath and shook her head.

Her behavior perplexed everyone. Wang Julong's unusual actions might indeed have had something to do with Yan Xiaobao. But if that were the case, what had transpired between them?

Deng Wu was the first to come to a conclusion. His handsome face quickly transformed into one of disbelief, followed by a sly grin. When he opened his mouth, his tone was somewhat husky, "Oh my! To think you'd treat poor Julong like that!" he exclaimed, his face filled with mock incredulity.

"What do you mean 'like that'?" a sharp voice retorted. Wang Julong stepped out from her tent, her face beet-red as she recalled how close Yan Xiaobao had been earlier—how his hand had brushed past her forehead paired with that gentle smile on his face.

Seeing her blush so deeply, Deng Wu became certain he had uncovered something juicy. Stretching out his arm, he gave Yan Xiaobao a congratulatory pat on the shoulder, a proud grin lighting up his face. "Young friend," he started ceremoniously, never missing a chance for theatrics, "now that you've become a man, I have to impress upon you the need to understand your responsibilities!" No sooner had he spoken than Deng Wu was knocked to the ground by Wang Julong, who swung her red staff with zero restraint, delivering a solid blow straight to his head.

Chapter 450: The Power of Deep Astonishment_2

Looking at the unconscious Deng Wu, the young white-haired man couldn't help but burst into laughter as he picked up a storage stone, hefted the heavy young man onto his back, and placed Deng Wu's belongings on him.

"Nothing happened," he said with a laugh while glancing around, his eyes calm yet honest. "We had a little conversation this morning, and I accidentally touched on an embarrassing topic. Let's be mindful of it."

Hearing Yan Xiaobao's excuse, Xie Lan and Xu Biao exchanged glances, both clearly unconvinced by the seemingly honest young man. Yan Xiaobao shrugged as though unbothered and began leading the group toward the city, eager to make it in time before the gates closed for the night.

Judging from Yan Xiaobao's casual remarks on the incident, the group slowly made their way to the city. At their current pace, if Deng Wu woke up at some point, they would likely arrive later in the afternoon. However, if Deng Wu remained unconscious, making it before the gates closed would be questionable.

Not much was said on the journey to the city; instead, everyone was lost in their own thoughts. Wang Julong was still somewhat embarrassed, while Xu Biao and Xie Lan communicated silently, as if words were unnecessary after spending so much time together.

Yan Xiaobao couldn't help but recall the scene from that morning. Wang Julong's stunning beauty had shocked him. Though he didn't quite understand why, he still felt a longing to see her again.

Sha Yun followed closely, her eyes darkened and her lips sealed. Unlike the rest of the group, she was neither interested in nor curious about what had transpired between their leader and the other girl. If anything, she felt it wasn't as innocent as Yan Xiaobao had described. Still, what irked her most was Wang Julong's blushing face and the intimacy shared between the two. Thinking of this made Sha Yun feel sick.

The silent journey was uncomfortable for some and filled with anticipation for others. While a few passed the time in a daze, others were simmering with inner frustrations.

Finally, as afternoon drew to a close, Deng Wu woke up, abruptly breaking the earlier silence. The young man immediately began bickering with Wang Julong, accusing her of deciding to abandon him and, in fact, not even treating his injuries afterward!

The brief peace was soon disrupted again as everyone resumed discussing theories, recent discoveries, or breakthroughs they'd experienced on their journey. Wang Julong and Xie Lan took to mentoring a young girl about healing, treating her as if she were an apprentice.

Deng Wu and Xu Biao were off to the side, chatting about who-knows-what, their occasional bursts of laughter hinting at shared life experiences that made Yan Xiaobao curious.

As the group traveled further, the scenery became increasingly urbanized. Here and there, small villages came into view, and the roads grew more trafficked.

The carts they saw along the way were laden with vegetables, meat, leather, and other goods, most headed for sale in the markets of the Capital. Groups of mercenaries were also returning to the city from various missions, chatting loudly as they anticipated their hard-earned pay.

The pace the group kept earlier in their journey was no longer possible. Instead, they slowed down, merging with the flow of people heading toward the city. As they neared the Capital, smiles surfaced on everyone's faces, even Xu Biao and Xie Lan—both of whom had visited the city multiple times before.

Upon entering the gates, Xu Biao was warmly welcomed, much to the amazement of the rest of the group. Mercenary City had already been impressive enough, rivaling Liluo City, but the Capital was far larger. The towering black brick walls dwarfed anything they'd seen before, and the gates, made of black iron, were almost impenetrable once closed.

The walls were five meters thick, with guards stationed on top, keeping a vigilant watch over their surroundings and scrutinizing newcomers for potential trouble.

Scanning his surroundings, Yan Xiaobao frowned, waiting for Xu Biao to catch up to him.

"I thought demons didn't attack cities here," he said in surprise as they passed through the massive gates. "Then what was the purpose of building such a heavy fortress in this cavern?"

Hearing the question, the elder Guild Master nodded approvingly. For those not raised in the Holy Dungeon, much of what they did seemed puzzling or intriguing.

"Long ago, there are legends of a great war. Men of unknown origin appeared at what we now call Cave's End, an uninhabited location at the time. Since then, many strongholds have been built, yet we've never seen those mysterious people of Cave's End again—that was well before your time."

The explanation ignited a storm of thoughts in Yan Xiaobao's mind. "Do you know how long ago that was?" he asked breathlessly. Unfortunately, the Guild Master shook his head. "I can't say I remember," he admitted, leaving the white-haired young man somewhat disappointed. "But if we have time, you could try researching it at the library."

Hearing this, hope reignited in Yan Xiaobao's ice-blue eyes, filling him with energy once more. The reason this intrigued him so deeply was the possibility of a connection to the great sins and even the Dark Era.

Understanding the Dark Era and the great sins were things Yan Xiaobao had set aside while living on the surface. In **Shenyun** (Divine Resonation), however, he had never imagined he'd stumble upon hints of these events.

Despite his bubbling excitement, he reminded himself not to get ahead of himself as he refocused on his surroundings.

The group, now swept up by a continuous wave of newcomers, flowed toward the marketplace, barely able to keep themselves from being engulfed by the crowd.

Neither Yan Xiaobao nor the others fought against the current. Instead, they absorbed their surroundings, their eyes darting around to take in as much as possible.

The first thing that caught the young man's attention was the multi-story buildings. The residential structures were all connected, with only a handful of narrow alleys hidden between their grimy walls.

As the crowd surged forward, they soon entered the market. Much like the one in Liluo City, this marketplace was divided into various sections, each managed by different families.

Once past the bustling market, the roads became easier to navigate. The density of people lessened, revealing well-dressed citizens leisurely passing by, along with children and adolescents running about.

With the crowd thinning, the group no longer wandered aimlessly. They simply followed Xu Biao, who was most familiar with the city. He led them to a house not far from their current location.

Unlike the houses near the city gates, these buildings had individual courtyards, some reaching as high as five stories. The Guild Master approached one such courtyard guarded by sentries at the front.

Upon seeing Xu Biao, the guards all straightened up and saluted him without a word. It was clear they recognized him.

Entering the courtyard, Xu Biao proceeded toward a four-story building at the back. His steps were steady and determined, his expression casual yet bored, as though visiting this place was routine for him.

While Xie Lan and Xu Biao appeared at ease, Yan Xiaobao and the others grew increasingly curious about why they were entering such a building—it looked like an inn.

"Li Shao greets Guild Master Xu!" a sudden voice called from the entrance. A burly man came into view. Built as large as a beast and resembling a massive pig, the sheer size of the man left the young group wide-eyed with shock. Even Deng Wu, who was no small figure, appeared diminutive in comparison. Yet this giant looked at Xu Biao with fawning admiration.

"I'm back," Xu Biao said with a sigh as he entered the room. "Li Shao, I need accommodations prepared for each of us in the mercenary dormitory. All rooms must be first-class and close to one another. I'll take my guests to the meeting room. Have someone fetch us when you're finished."

Hearing Xu Biao's commands, Yan Xiaobao began piecing things together, realizing where they were and what was happening. The giant wasted no time waiting for further instructions. Instead, he quickly bowed to the Guild Master and turned to bellow orders at the people around him.

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