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The city was completely different from the one Xu Hui had experienced in the caves earlier. Although there were inns available, most of them operated as rented courtyards. Here, one could rent a courtyard and stay for a week or even up to a year. These accommodations were typically rented to cultivators seeking to remain in Thousand River Cave for an extended period to improve their cultivation foundation.

"How long do you think we should stay?" Xu Yue asked Xu Biao, as many of them stood before the clerk to rent a courtyard.

"Leave it to me," Xu Biao said with a smile, pulling out a pouch filled with Demon Coins and handing it to the clerk before them.

"A year? And an advanced courtyard? You must have some background for me to rent you one," the clerk said hesitantly. However, Xu Biao produced a golden badge embedded with a silver symbol. Upon seeing the badge, the clerk was instantly flustered and bowed deeply, saying, "Milords, we would never dare to charge such esteemed guests for the courtyard! Please use all of its facilities freely!"

Seeing the clerk's drastic change in attitude, Yan Xiaobao couldn't help but raise his eyebrows, wondering why the man had suddenly altered his behavior.

However, he was wise enough not to ask this question in front of the clerk, choosing to remain silent instead. He watched as the clerk handed Xu Biao a Memory Stone Key. Afterward, the clerk bowed to all of them, and they left for the new courtyard that would be their home for the year.

"Are you sure we should rest here for an entire year?" Deng Wu asked with a frown. After all, they were on a mission from Zhou Long, tasked with delivering information to the final cave in the cave system containing the Cave Dragon Core.

"Don't worry about the mission," Yan Xiaobao said with a smile. "Zhou Long will likely reach us at the last cave ahead. Even if we take it easy, wherever we go, there's bound to be spies following us."

The notion of being under surveillance caused Deng Wu, Wang Julong, and Sha Yun to tremble nervously as they glanced around. Seeing this, Yan Xiaobao couldn't help but laugh aloud as he followed Xu Biao, motioning for his suddenly paranoid friends to follow him.

The courtyard they were led to was positioned in the middle of a park along with three other courtyards. They were spaced far apart, allowing for privacy. In front of their courtyard was a tranquil lake where white swans swam among beautiful water lilies.

Their buildings were pristine white, like freshly fallen snow. Even the surrounding walls were painted white. Two guards stood in front, ensuring no one entered without permission.

When the guards saw Xu Biao and Yan Xiaobao arriving with their entourage, they straightened up, their eyes locked on the group of men. Though they showed no hostility, their gaze remained watchful as they blocked the path.

"Forgive me," one of the guards said in a deep voice. "I'll need to see your authorization before allowing you to remain in this compound."

Upon hearing this, Xu Biao promptly showed the Memory Stone Key given to him by the clerk. Once the door opened, the two guards immediately bowed.

"Welcome home, God," the guards said in unison as they bowed deeply. Yan Xiaobao and the others were slightly taken aback, but Xu Biao seemed accustomed to the treatment.

Watching the still-bowing guards, Yan Xiaobao couldn't help but wonder if they would behave this way every time they entered the courtyard or if it was just a one-time occurrence. However, he didn't have time to dwell on such thoughts long because Xu Biao entered the courtyard with an amused smile on his face, his Mercenary Badge hanging from his hand.

The badge was engraved with a large "B," identical to the symbol Hui Yue had seen earlier that day, finally making sense to him. The clerk's behavior had stemmed from Yan Xiaobao's presence. Since both he and the others on the mission were considered B-rank.

"So, a whole year, huh?" Yan Xiaobao said, surveying the surroundings. The courtyard consisted of three houses and a stable. Behind the main house was a tall multi-storied building; next to it were two smaller ones — one for bathing and another for training. When he entered the training house, a large white pearl was situated in the center, doubling the Heaven and Earth Essence within the room.

Sitting down, the white-haired boy immediately entered a state of meditation. He ignored his friends and was unbothered by the other distractions in the courtyard. His focus remained locked on the vibrant atmosphere of the room.

Hui Yue's brows furrowed against the floor as his cultivation techniques operated at their peak capacity. Energy transformed into Qi, and then further refined into spiritual energy. Within his spiritual energy ocean, the accumulation continued, and with each drop of newly refined spiritual energy falling into the ocean, massive ripples formed. They collided with an intangible barrier that prevented further cultivation.

Seated and immersed in meditation, no one observing him could tell he was currently stuck in a bottleneck. However, they all knew the importance he placed on his cultivation, so they quietly left the room, allowing him to refine alone.

When the group entered the main building — the multi-storied house — they were shocked to find everything constructed from white marble. The house gleamed like a pearl, beautiful and pristine.

They quickly chose their rooms, and after inspecting all the spaces, the group hurried back to the house where Yan Xiaobao was cultivating.

Their quick return stemmed from their understanding of the importance of increasing their strength. At present, Yan Xiaobao was the most powerful among them, not counting Xie Lan and Xu Biao. The others refused to remain weak and didn't want to become burdens to Yan Xiaobao.

Sitting down, Xu Biao smiled with pride as he observed the young cultivators' newfound zeal for cultivation. Unlike them, Xu Biao was an Upper Dantian cultivator. His requirements were not merely to refine Qi into spiritual energy continuously; instead, he needed a greater understanding of Wu Wei.

Although Qi was a force refined from Heaven and Earth Essence and spiritual energy refined from Qi, Wu Wei's energy was much more complex.

Wu Wei was derived from spiritual energy. However, the amount one could refine depended on one's understanding of Heaven and Earth Essence. Cultivators needed to return to basics and gain a deeper understanding of the world's energies. Only when a cultivator improved their comprehension could their strength grow further.

As Xu Biao smiled while observing the four young cultivators, his grin widened when he looked at Yan Xiaobao. Outside, everything seemed normal, but for someone like the Guild Master, with profound understanding and heightened senses of Earth Heaven's nature, it was a marvel. In the room, boundless energy converged toward the youth's body at an unimaginable speed.

Yan Xiaobao gritted his teeth as he pushed his body to its limits. So far, he hadn't succeeded in breaking through the bottleneck suppressing him. Yet he didn't give up, hoping to overcome the obstacle eventually. Instead, he pushed his limits further, refining at an arduous pace. Now, the spiritual energy within his ocean no longer fell in mere droplets; it surged forth as a continuous stream of silver liquid, spreading across the winding spiritual ocean.

Though it was fast, Yan Xiaobao could have advanced even quicker if he had compromised the quality of his Qi. However, the young white-haired boy remembered Lan Feng's earlier warnings. Staying firm in his resolve, even at slower refinement rates, he refused to compromise quality.

The stream of spiritual energy flowing into his body generated increasingly powerful waves that crashed against the barrier.

At first, the barrier remained immovable—one or two waves couldn't even shake it slightly. But now, wave after wave struck the obstacle, and each impact caused it to tremble. The more it trembled, the more it spurred his cultivation techniques. Sweat dripped down his face, his brows furrowed, his teeth clenched. Every muscle in his body tensed, his hands clenched tightly, and a drop of blood trickled from his palms.

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Wave after wave crashed down, sweat streaming down his face. The young man could barely breathe as his entire focus remained fixed on the waves pounding against the obstacle.

Finally, what seemed like an entire year later, cracks began to appear in the barrier. Feeling the dedication behind it, excitement surged in Yan Xiaobao's heart. The waning energy suddenly reignited, forcing his body to continue pushing against the obstacle. Wave after wave, until the spiritual energy finally surged through the barrier, causing it to completely collapse. His spiritual energy quickly stabilized, signifying it was no longer stuck at the barrier.

His body changed, and so did the sea. The waves constantly clashing against the barrier now relaxed at the edges of his spiritual energy sea, which had been relentlessly fighting. It was clear the edges of the lake were now much higher than before. The sea, which now extended beyond its previous boundaries, suddenly seemed like a parched lake due to how dispersed it had become.

The spiritual energy sea wasn't the only thing that had transformed in size; the five elemental flames hovering above the sea's surface had doubled in size. The cavern itself appeared larger as well.

His body was drenched in sweat and grime. Impurities absorbed during cultivation had been forced out through his pores, and when Yan Xiaobao opened his eyes, a satisfied smile spread across his face.

Though his spiritual energy sea seemed thinner than before, it was now tens of times stronger. This was the difference between Master level and Master-level rankings.

Standing up, Yan Xiaobao heard his bones crack. Looking at himself, it was evident that he had grown.

Yan Xiaobao decided to head to the main hall and find a random room. Surveying his surroundings, he was surprised to see that each room had access to a heated steam bath. Excited, he jumped straight into one without caring if the room belonged to one of his teammates. If they saw him naked, so be it; he didn't want dirt sticking to his body longer than absolutely necessary.

Soaking in the water, a long sigh escaped from Yan Xiaobao's lips as he caught sight of his reflection. His eyebrows raised as he noticed that he looked less feminine. Though his features still resembled those of a delicate man, it was now unmistakable that he was a man rather than the woman many had previously mistaken him for.

As he leaned back into the warm water, his satisfied expression softened, and he closed his eyes. He felt considerably stronger than before. Although he still didn't feel ready to face the Scar-faced Killer, he was confident he was on the right path. One more breakthrough, and he should be able to contend with upper-level Dantian experts. Unfortunately, breaking through Duke Level was proving more challenging than he had anticipated.

Gradually, Yan Xiaobao dozed off in the water, his body exhausted, his spirit drained. After an hour of sleep, he opened his eyes feeling slightly off. Not willing to linger for long, he grabbed a robe to cover himself, but as he was about to leave the steam bath, he froze, hearing voices beyond the door.

"How much longer do you plan to pretend to be friends with these people?" Xie Lan sighed impatiently, her voice deeply shocking to Yan Xiaobao.

"How much longer do you plan to pretend to be friends with these people?" Xie Lan asked again, the creaking of someone sitting on a bed accompanying her voice.

Previously wary, Yan Xiaobao instantly stiffened. His entire body froze, and instead of his initial intention to step through the door, he stood motionless beside it.

"Don't be so harsh," Xu Biao chuckled, seemingly unfazed by Xie Lan's repeated inquiry. "It's our job," he continued, his tone now much more serious than before. "We'll complete the mission. We'll see it through. Don't you enjoy your time with these young ones? I find them entertaining."

Hearing Xu Biao's voice, Yan Xiaobao's eyes narrowed slightly. He could hear Xu Biao pacing in the room beyond the door. Truth be told, Xu Biao's aura had swept over Yan Xiaobao's presence long ago, but the Guild Master had never believed Yan Xiaobao would be inside his room, as he hadn't bothered to check the surroundings before starting to talk.

Standing in the bathhouse, Yan Xiaobao felt shaken by what he overheard. But one thing was certain—the Guild Master hadn't joined the team solely to travel to the Dragon's Core Cavern; it seemed he had an entirely different agenda.

Quietly waiting until all the sounds in the room settled, hoping for more revelations, Yan Xiaobao ultimately heard nothing further. No longer daring to risk discovery, he slipped through the bathroom window instead. Like a cat, he landed gracefully on the ground outside.

Touching down, Yan Xiaobao's thoughts turned chaotic as he quickly returned to the training room where he sat down to meditate.

This time, he didn't meditate for cultivation. Instead, he sought to organize his thoughts and decide what course of action he should take.

Trusting Xu Biao was something Yan Xiaobao had done for a long time. The Guild Master had always been an easygoing yet straightforward figure. Having traveled together for over half a year, he had consistently appeared reliable throughout their journey. Even before their expedition began, Yan Xiaobao had trusted the man who now seemed so unlike the friend he used to know.

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It now proved that, in order to have an eventful company trip, he wasn't part of their team but instead carrying out a mission, one that was connected to Yan Xiaobao and his friends.

Xie Lan had once asked Xu Biao how long he planned to stay close to his friends. Yet, the Guild Master himself claimed that they were friends. To consider himself one of their allies while simultaneously working on a mission concerning them must mean the mission inherently wasn't hostile; however, the man hadn't shared this detail with Yan Xiaobao, which left him feeling uneasy.

Their options were either to continue traveling alongside Xu Biao and Xie Lan while maintaining vigilance, or to evade them, which might escalate into an ugly confrontation—four mid-Dantian cultivators squaring off against two King-level experts.

Through deliberation, Yan Xiaobao determined that he could not let Xu Biao and Xie Lan turn against them suddenly. The only way to avoid such an outcome was to keep proceeding as they were. Knowing things wouldn't change, he decided to investigate further and find out precisely what kind of mission they were on. Hence, he chose not to disclose any of the information he'd obtained to his friends.

After cleaning his body, no longer covered in grime, and setting aside thoughts of their predicament, Yan Xiaobao opted to focus on cultivation. His silk robe clung softly to his skin.

Typically, after achieving a breakthrough to a new level, he'd pause for some rest. But knowing danger could strike at any moment, he no longer had the luxury to grit his teeth and clench his fists; instead, he pushed his cultivation techniques to their limits, maximizing his pace.

"Why is Yue's training so grueling?" Deng Wu curiously asked, as Yan Xiaobao had remained seated in meditation for three consecutive days without a single movement. Although the group spent a portion of each day in their rooms, they couldn't train as frequently as the young boy who seemed steadfast. They required occasional breaks, meals, and trips into the city.

They had seen Yan Xiaobao train before, but had never witnessed him entirely ignore the necessities of reality.

Still as a statue, Yan Xiaobao wasn't aware three days had passed. In truth, he had entirely lost track of time; his sole focus lingered on the continuous flow of spiritual energy, streaming into the vast sea of his Energy Sea.

Drop by drop, as he stared at the sparse lake-like surface, Yan Xiaobao realized that if he wished to qualify for entry into Duke University, he'd need at least one or two years of uninterrupted meditation. For him, spending one or two years in ceaseless meditation was unequivocally impossible.

Although cultivation techniques emphasized the refinement of spiritual energy, Yan Xiaobao allocated his time toward elemental fusion.

Fire, metal, and earth were three immensely powerful elements, potent even when wielded individually, and Yan Xiaobao couldn't forget the elemental flames harnessed by geological experts he'd witnessed. Now, he aimed to create a flame powered not by all five elements of fire, but solely by three. A flame embodying three elemental affinities would undoubtedly possess fierce potency as an attack.

The primary reason Yan Xiaobao lost track of time stemmed from being utterly consumed by thoughts of elemental flame. Conceiving the idea was one thing; actually merging the elements was an entirely different endeavor.

Yan Xiaobao found himself capable of switching between the elements he'd fused. By the fourth day, his body cyclically alternated between earth, metal, and fire. For mere nanoseconds, his form would merge two elements, then shift from one to another, as the duration of dual-element coexistence incrementally lengthened, albeit very slowly.

On the seventh day, Yan Xiaobao still hadn't succeeded in maintaining a dual-element fusion for more than several seconds. This rendered summoning fused flames impossible, and he finally opened his eyes. Despite his failure, his focus remained razor-sharp, as he sensed dense ambient energy in his surroundings.

"You're finally awake!" Sha Yun, seated beside him, remarked. She had spent her entire afternoon staring at his face, hoping he'd open his eyes for sheer entertainment's sake, as she had grown incredibly bored.

"I'm sorry, Yun." Yan Xiaobao lightly smoothed the Snake Woman's hair, apologizing earnestly. "I deeply regret being preoccupied, but I truly need to comprehend this concept. If my new attack turns out as strong as I anticipate, we might just stand a chance against the Scar-faced Killer."

Upon hearing he might be capable of confronting their adversary, Sha Yun couldn't suppress her shock. She knew their opponent was a King-level expert, whereas Yan Xiaobao was merely a Master cultivator. While he had broken into a higher level, it bore remembering that the white-haired boy was far from capable of confronting Wu Wei alone. The gap between mid-level Dantian cultivators and Upper Dantian King-level experts was as wide as the heavens and earth. Yet the boy claimed he might handle him—a detail that emphasized the danger woven into the attack he was refining.

"That's all well and good, but you've still spent far too much time sitting here alone," Sha Yun pouted at Yan Xiaobao as she observed him closely. "Come with me to the town and see the gorgeous city in its most splendid forms." She insisted firmly, her pouting expression drawing out a faint chuckle from the white-haired young man.

"Give me a moment to bathe and grab something to eat." Xu Yue waved toward Sha Yun and stood, heading toward the building where their lodgings and the water were situated.

This time, Yan Xiaobao ensured not to intrude upon Xu Biao or Xie Lan's rooms. Instead, he knocked patiently until finding an unoccupied room, quickly stepped inside, and approached the warm water. As he cleaned himself again, his thoughts were flooded with strategies to increase the duration of dual-element fusion.

Yan Xiaobao reclined in the warm bathwater, swiftly cleaning himself. He later extracted another robe from his storage ring and dressed quickly. Then he retrieved some dried meat strips, sitting leisurely on the bed in the main room while chewing them slowly.

Yan Xiaobao's gaze wandered as he ate the dried meat strips—a distant yet reflective expression in his eyes. He contemplated how elements in nature interwove harmoniously: how fire and metal could form new gemstones, how water and wood could stimulate new plant growth. All things converged and coalesced, forming the intricate balance of life.

Perhaps what Yan Xiaobao truly needed was to comprehend the natural fusion between the three elements, instead of simply attempting to force them together.

Yan Xiaobao shook his head, stood up, and stepped out of the room, crossing paths with Xu Biao at the doorway.

"Ah, Xiao Yue!" Xu Biao smiled broadly with greeting. "It's great to see you not training for a change. Are you heading out to admire the city's gorgeous scenery and luxurious shops?" he asked amicably, though Yan Xiaobao found it odd seeing him for the first time since hearing about matters days before.

"Yes," Yan Xiaobao answered tersely, wearing a peculiar expression that made the older man furrow his brows.

"Is something wrong?" Xu Biao asked inquisitively, wondering what could have caused the white-haired youth to appear so detached while speaking with him.

"Oh, it's nothing," Yan Xiaobao quickly replied, shaking his head slightly. "I was merely contemplating how fortunate we are to have reliable companions like you," he added before turning away, heading toward the corridor where Sha Yun awaited him.

Xu Biao was left standing, an ugly expression lingering on his face. The older man was thankful for Yan Xiaobao's appreciation, yet simultaneously weighed down by the guilt of deceiving his newfound companion, a guilt that gnawed deeply at his conscience.

As Yan Xiaobao approached Sha Yun, he didn't glance back even once. He was fully aware that he'd see an unpleasant look etched across the older man's features.

Meeting Sha Yun, the Snake Woman promptly clasped the younger white-haired man in an embrace, eagerly dragging him toward the courtyard gates.

Once at the main gates, two guards promptly saluted the two guests. As one of their own, Yan Xiaobao respectfully returned their salute.

With formalities complete, Sha Yun led him through a stunning park. Together, they traveled alongside a canal, boarding a small boat that ferried them through the picturesque city.

Seated on the vessel, Yan Xiaobao surveyed his surroundings, soaking in the countless alluring rowhouses. His enamored gaze sparkled with astonishment and appreciation. Unlike every city he had seen so far, this city seemed to have no signs of poverty—no beggars, no starvation.

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Yan Xiaobao is not stupid. He knows it's impossible for the city to have no poor people, and he believes the poor are driven off the streets, making it harder for them to beg for food.

Sha Yun was very direct in her approach. She refused to give up, as Yan Xiaobao had already paid some attention to Wang Julong. Once they left the ship, Hui Yue was dragged across a street on the way to the city's largest market.

Going out with Sha Yun was like going out with a girl in his previous life. They would see anything from clothing to jewelry. Unlike other worlds, they would also look at weapons, pills, and armor. After viewing the items, they bought some snacks and spent most of their time wandering around, looking at one stall after another.

By evening, Sha Yun had been gifted a set of bracelets by Yan Xiaobao. Now, the two friends were heading toward the courtyard, where everyone awaited them.

Seeing the Snake Woman so happy, Yan Xiaobao couldn't help but feel happy as well. Sha Yun was one of his closest friends. She was someone he could trust unconditionally, always there to serve him. The emotions Yan Xiaobao felt were definitely feelings of gratitude and happiness.

However, recently another emotion stirred within him, and it surfaced again today when he saw the pearl white hairpin. Before realizing it, Yan Xiaobao had bought the hairpin, imagining how beautiful it would look in Wang Julong's hair, his heart started racing.

Even now, when they were alone together, he was happy to see her face when he handed it to her.

Sha Yun's face was full of smiles, yet she noticed a sad expression flashing across the young man beside her because she remembered the excited look on his face when he bought the hairpin.

Sha Yun knew what Yan Xiaobao was thinking when purchasing the item. Although he bought her a set of bracelets, that knowledge deeply hurt her heart.

The sadness on the Snake Woman's face quickly turned from sadness to determination and then back to a happy smile. Her thoughts vanished into sorrow. From the start, she knew she might not win Yan Xiaobao's love, but still, she hoped day by day.

At first, she didn't know if her unrequited love would come true, but as she got older, she felt more that she was only treated as a friend. Her only happiness was that Wang Julong treated her the same way. Unfortunately, this seemed to have changed recently.

Yan Xiaobao looked at the black-haired woman, his eyes full of playful smiles, filled with amusement that Sha Yun had never seen directed at anyone other than herself.

Whenever she felt awkward, he would laugh and make her feel embarrassed without reservation. It was something he had never done before.

It's not just small things like this, but also the fact that he often seemed distracted when looking at her. All these things were visible to Sha Yun, who spent her time by his side. These facts brought great sadness to the Snake Woman, who refused to give up, despite Yan Xiaobao seemingly looking at another girl.

As they walked back to the courtyard, they talked about training. Yan Xiaobao was uncertain if he could achieve another breakthrough in a year, but Sha Yun supported him as always. Being a magical beast very similar to humans, the Snake Woman sighed deeply, wondering if she would soon reach the Master level.

As a magical beast, her fusion with the elements was completely different from that of humans. If she were to increase her rank to Master, she would be able to merge further with the current elements. This would significantly enhance her strength; although she might not be able to defeat Yan Xiaobao, she would certainly be able to win this battle greatly.

Back at the courtyard, Yan Xiaobao noticed new guards standing at the gate, but upon seeing the two approaching, they respectfully bowed and opened the door.

Having spent most of his time outside, Yan Xiaobao headed straight to the training room, where he sat down to start cultivating. He knew it might not be possible to reach the Duke level within the given time, but as long as there was even a half-chance of success, the young man would do everything he could to achieve it.

When he entered the training room, he was shocked to see Wang Julong already sitting inside with Deng Wu. Both were deep in meditation, and the thick air was full of the essence of heaven and earth, running ceaselessly, inhaled and exhaled by the two cultivators as they absorbed it to their heart's content.

Seeing Wang Julong there, Yan Xiaobao quietly approached her and placed her gift in front of her. As he looked at those calm and peaceful beautiful features while she focused on cultivating, a gentle smile appeared on his face.

Not wanting to disturb her cultivation, Yan Xiaobao withdrew so slowly. He walked away slowly, found a place in the room to sit, and began to breathe steadily. He closed his eyes and enhanced his cultivation techniques.

Following Yan Xiaobao into the room, Sha Yun saw the pain in her eyes, but she quickly choked down all the negative emotions and tightly embraced her white-haired friend, almost cultivating together with them.

Yan Xiaobao wasn't so blind, nor did he fail to notice Sha Yun's feelings for him, but her back in Liluo City was very stiff and directly told her it wasn't mutual.

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Even after discovering all of this, Sha Yun stayed by his side. She still hoped that one day this young man might turn around and look at her. Unfortunately, before that could happen, Sha Yun realized that Yan Xiaobao now cared for another woman instead of her.

Although the Snake Woman lamented her emotions, as soon as she entered meditation, all of it quickly faded away. Afterward, the only thing she thought of was the feeling of being connected to the world. Absorbing the essence of the heavens, the energy rushed into her body before it entered her beast core, swirling around it and transforming into mist-like energy. This was the type of energy Magic Beasts used when activating their abilities.

As the four of them sat together in the room, time passed slowly. The sun hanging in the sky transformed into the moon, layering soft light upon the beautiful white courtyard.

Bathed in the gentle moonlight streaming through the windows, the four young individuals remained fully immersed in their meditation. For Wang Julong, Sha Yun, and Deng Wu, this was among the longest meditation sessions they had ever experienced. Only Yan Xiaobao meditated longer than he had before.

Suddenly, the moonlight pouring through the window was blocked by someone's silhouette. Had the young ones not been completely engrossed in their cultivation, they would have noticed Xu Biao standing there, his face wearing a complex expression, a mix of hesitation and regret.

Xu Biao let out a deep sigh, turned around, and slowly walked out of the courtyard. In his hand, he held a small Memory Stone as he headed toward the main office of the rental building with steady steps.

Xu Biao entered the office and walked straight to the counter, waiting for someone to assist him. In this cave, the counter was always open and ready to accommodate anyone who arrived, no matter the hour.

Seeing Xu Biao, a man who once bore the mark of Grade B, the manager promptly sprang into action and rushed toward him, bowing deeply with both hands clasped tight.

"What can I do for you, my good sir?" he asked with a smile, his hands releasing their clasp and instead rubbing against each other. His expression revealed a hint of greed that Xu Biao did not notice, though he was powerless to counter it as he raised the Memory Stone from his hand.

"I need to send a Memory Stone to the main office of the Dragon Army located in the Demon Residence Cave," Xu Biao said in a somber tone, his eyes appearing darker than usual, and his demeanor far from cheerful. Every time he sent a message to Zhou Long, it always became increasingly difficult.

When Xu Biao had first encountered Yan Xiaobao and his companions, the Guild Master had been intensely intrigued by them, especially upon learning that they came from the surface world. He had harbored hopes of using his connection with these young cultivators to leave the cave and see the world Yan Xiaobao spoke of.

Noticing Zhou Long's interest in Yan Xiaobao, Xu Biao soon realized that the Dragon Army leader was aware of the fact that this white-haired boy came from another world. Zhou Long had made sure he knew this as well.

Upon receiving this information, Zhou Long immediately tasked the Guild Master with the duty of reporting any critical details to him—to track their journey and ensure that Yan Xiaobao faced no danger. On the other hand, Zhou Long did not care about protecting any of the other young individuals. In fact, if only the white-haired youth survived to reach the Capital, that would be the ideal scenario.

Zhou Long had even informed Xu Biao that mercenaries would be dispatched during their journey to assassinate the young cultivators—warning them to keep Yan Xiaobao alive. Although Xu Biao felt guilty for his actions, Yan Xiaobao remained fully immersed in his training. At the moment when the sunrise dyed the sky purple, he finally opened his eyes.

Looking around, he saw his friends still focused on cultivating. He let out a sigh and allowed his consciousness to sink into the Dantian Cave, where he noticed Lan Feng, who wasn't cultivating. Instead, Lan Feng sat silently, seemingly deep in thought.

"I knew you'd come," Lan Feng chuckled when he saw Yan Xiaobao's spirit projection approaching him. The white-haired boy laughed softly as he sat beside the Phoenix.

"What do you think I should do about Xu Biao?" Yan Xiaobao asked casually, though the decision had already been made. He merely valued the opinion of his lifelong companion.

'I stand by your decision.' The bird sighed and replied, 'He bears no hostility toward you. In fact, he claims to consider you a friend. While he might be using you to strengthen his position or escape these tunnels, no one said he's the only one capable of exploiting connections for personal gain.' The bird's face broke into a mischievous grin as it added, "Letting him feed information about you to Zhou Long—or potentially manipulate events to gain two King-level protectors—isn't necessarily a bad idea."

Hearing this, Yan Xiaobao couldn't help but smile faintly, nodding in agreement with the bird. They remained in the tranquil environment for a while, as Yan Xiaobao's gaze swept over the countless small caves, each of them radiating strange forms of energy.

His eyes rested on golden wings as he furrowed his brows, suddenly recalling what Lan Feng had mentioned earlier.

'Hey.' Yan Xiaobao nudged the bird beside him, "When I flew over with my Qi Fan earlier, everyone was deeply shocked. Although we did manage to escape the illusion of the Endless Forest, Xie Lan and Xu Biao seemed unable to pull it off.

"They're King-level experts, aren't they supposed to be capable of creating wings to fly?" Yan Xiaobao asked curiously.

"No," Lan Feng sighed, "When you flew using golden wings, the only reason you could manage it was because they continually consumed martial power. Those wings require an enormous amount of it.

"For King-level experts, or even Emperor-ranked ones, using their martial power to create wings and fly wouldn't last long before their wings disintegrated and they plummeted from the sky."

'Why is that?'

"Flying belongs to the domain of birds and Saints," Lan Feng explained with a sigh. "Unlike you, no one else can truly fly. People can float, hover in place, or even fly with the aid of martial power for a limited distance, but prolonged flight using Qing Fa or martial flight wings is impossible.

"Qi Fan is a rare ability I had to pay an exorbitant price to obtain. It's one of the most unique powers I've acquired. As for those wings ignoring martial power like those birthed by Heaven, I really don't know—I wouldn't dare examine them.

As Yan Xiaobao processed Lan Feng's words, he fell into a contemplative silence. Flight was indeed reserved for birds and Saints. He had seen people hovering and brief bursts of flight before, but never anyone capable of long-distance flying.

"Lan Feng," Yan Xiaobao asked again as he sat beside him, his tone tinged with nostalgia.

'Yes?' Phoenix responded, unburdened by the pressures of training or refinement. This moment offered Yan Xiaobao the best chance to get the answers he sought.

"This is a cave, and I know we're heading toward the so-called Dragon's Core in the middle to leave the underground city. But why can't we simply fly to the ceiling and start digging our way out?" Yan Xiaobao asked, his gaze drifting toward the ceiling through the window.

"Digging out of a sacred dungeon?" Lan Feng suddenly burst into laughter.

'Is that impossible?'

'Indeed. Not possible. Have you ever wondered how a cave of this size manages to stand without pillars to support it?' Lan Feng asked, reacting to the thought of simply digging out as if it were preposterous.

'These underground cities were created according to the will of my ancestors and other Divine Beasts. They are upheld by eternal magic—the World Power of the Ancestors. Even if Sha Yun rampaged through the tunnels, tearing down every wall, the ceiling still wouldn't collapse. The cave ceiling refuses to fall; it's protected by a failsafe barrier ensuring its permanence, while also preventing anyone from digging their way out.'

Hearing this made some sense to Yan Xiaobao. He nodded slightly. "So the only exit is the Dragon's Core? We need to find a way to leave from there?"

'No,' Lan Feng disagreed yet again. "When we reach the Dragon's Core, we will be entering the portion of the dungeon that belongs to the Phoenix Descendants. Our goal is to traverse these underground cities and make it to the Mountain Source."

"That's going to take a long time, isn't it?" Yan Xiaobao asked, already sensing their journey was a monumental undertaking.

"My goal is for you to become a King-level expert when we reach the Mountain Source." Lan Feng sighed and said, "Only while traveling these underground cities will such rapid progress be possible for you."

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The silence settled once again, and the two friends sat motionlessly together until Yan Xiaobao remembered another question he wanted to ask. "The law," he said, "do you know why the Dragon Army is hunting down the law?"

"No," Lan Feng replied, his eyes flashing with anger. "In the past, the law was revered as a sacred part of society within the Holy Dungeon. Now they are being hunted. I wonder if all four regions of the underground city are doing this."

"Don't worry," Yan Xiaobao said, sensing that Phoenix genuinely cared about these rules, "When I discover what happened to them, I'll do my best to help. Let's treat it as additional cultivation practice."

After that, neither of them spoke again. Yan Xiaobao and Lan Feng remained quiet, merely sitting side by side, calmly focusing on the cultivation techniques within the Dantian Cave, working as efficiently as they could.

After an hour of resting side by side, Lan Feng sighed again and closed his eyes. His celestial blue body began to glow with a golden radiance. He once again refined spiritual energy, letting a drop descend from the center of the Dantian, and continued cultivating Wu Wei.

Seeing Phoenix focus on refining once again, Yan Xiaobao sighed. He re-entered his own body only to find that now everyone had left him alone. Outside, the sun had ceased its beautiful violet glow, now burning brightly in the sky, heating the entire cave.

Upon leaving the house, Yan Xiaobao noticed that the entire courtyard was empty. It seemed as though no one was around, which surprised him. It had been a long time since they all ventured out without him, but he shrugged after a moment and walked into the main house to prepare for his own outing. He was eager to experience this beautiful city once more.

Preparation took a long time, as Yan Xiaobao enjoyed the soothing warmth of the water on his fatigued body. He also thought that if he took his time, perhaps his friends would return. But when he finished, no one had come back.

Staring at the empty house, his face showed a slight frown. It seemed they all had a reason to leave together, but this hadn't happened before. A sense of unease crept over the white-haired boy. The feeling of danger lingered, as though it could strike at any moment.

Choosing not to wait in the courtyard any longer, Yan Xiaobao calmly made his way toward the inner city. He paid for a boat to take him to the market where he had previously been with Sha Yun, hoping they had gone out shopping. However, when he arrived at the market, his friends were nowhere to be seen, heightening his concern.

Before searching restaurants and inns, Yan Xiaobao combed through the entire market, moving from one stall to the next, but no matter where he looked, there was no trace of his friends.

The sun was no longer high in the sky; instead, it had begun to set as Yan Xiaobao left the last sector of the town he'd entered. He decided to take another boat back to the courtyard, hoping his friends had returned in his absence.

Yet, that was not the case. Upon his return, he noticed the house was as empty as when he had left it. No one was there, and Yan Xiaobao felt even more worried than before.

Once more, he thoroughly searched every room, finding nothing. As he passed through the last room, however, a sound could be heard coming from outside the building.

Heading outside, he was deeply shocked. As Xu Biao and Xie Lan stumbled their way in through the courtyard gates, Yan Xiaobao stared openly at them. The two were leaning on each other, both severely injured. In Xie Lan's hand, a faint green light shimmered, just enough to keep them on their feet.

Gazing at the two, a cold light flickered in Yan Xiaobao's icy-blue eyes. He pondered the whereabouts of his friends before steadily approaching the two wounded King Ranking Experts.

"Yan Xiaobao," Xu Biao croaked with a weak voice. "You need to help us," he continued, his words barely audible, as all his energy had been drained by the mere act of speaking. But the pain was unmistakable as he added, "We fought the Dragon Army."

"Where are my friends?" Yan Xiaobao asked through gritted teeth.

"They've been taken. You need to get them back. Use the B-grade badge you were given. I believe they'll release them if you do."

"Why didn't you use yours?" Yan Xiaobao countered, rage flaring in his heart. Xu Biao's words made no sense to the white-haired boy.

First off, how could two King-level experts be defeated? Secondly, if the B-grade badge was sufficient, why hadn't he used his? And thirdly, Yan Xiaobao knew he couldn't trust him based on what he'd been told previously.

Yan Xiaobao clenched his teeth and fists tightly, glaring at the two injured King Ranking Experts, wondering the extent of their injuries and what had truly transpired.

When he finally spoke, his icy-blue eyes gleamed with frost. "Explain."

Xu Biao and Xie Lan shared a brief glance, understanding they couldn't be vague about what had happened. It was clear Yan Xiaobao needed a full explanation.

Sighing heavily, Xu Biao began to recount the events. "While you were still cultivating in the training room, the others finished their session and began discussing what to do next. They decided to go out to eat. They all knew you'd probably be busy for the better part of the day."

"Hearing their decision, we chose to tag along. After all, reaching our level means cultivation isn't particularly beneficial, so spending time with friends and experiencing the beauty of the city seemed like a better way to use our time. We also thought, if fortune favored us, we might even gain enlightenment. Many cultivators have achieved epiphanies in this breathtaking city."

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When he heard those words, Yan Xiaobao's eyes turned increasingly dark. The once light ice-blue color of summer skies in his gaze now resembled the depths of the ocean's darkness. He didn't bother waiting to hear their plans; what mattered to him was what had happened to his friends—their condition and current whereabouts.

"Hurry up," he commanded sharply, cutting off the prolonged prelude before the actual explanation could begin.

Taking another glance at Xie Lan, Xu Biao sighed deeply, yet he moved Yan Xiaobao back, maintaining the same distance as before. Internally, he began to invoke Lan Feng. Phoenix's only hope was that Yan Xiaobao could somehow overcome the two King Experts standing before him.

"I'm sorry, child," Lan Feng's voice echoed faintly. "I still can't help you. Although I've gathered enough martial power for a single attack, you'll need it significantly more in the future."

"I can't leave my friends behind here all alone!" Yan Xiaobao exclaimed.

"They won't stay here," Lan Feng replied matter-of-factly. "They're likely being treated as highly important prisoners and will be transferred to the Dragon Core for trial proceedings. If I were you, I'd head straight to the Dragon Core and deal with Scarface first, then position myself to intercept them at wherever they're sent next."

"Do you think that sounds simple?" Lan Feng continued with a weary sigh. "Scar-faced Killer is likely far stronger than you by many magnitudes. It won't be easy dealing with him. Tackling the guards protecting my friends afterward will only prove even harder. I'm not certain we even stand a chance against them.'

"Let's follow their plans first," Lan Feng suggested. "We'll head to the Dragon Company's office and flash our B-ranked badge. Hopefully, they haven't left yet."

Yan Xiaobao nodded resolutely, glaring toward Xu Biao and Xie Lan, then dashed out of the courtyard without bothering to listen to any more words from his two older companions. Although the dialogue felt long-winded, it had in reality only taken a brief moment of time.

Seeing Yan Xiaobao deep in thought, Xu Biao and Xie Lan dared not disturb him. They naturally fell silent and did nothing more. After contemplating for another second, Yan Xiaobao once again glared at them before taking action.

Rushing past the ship, Yan Xiaobao stepped toward the town's center. There, in the heart of the main square stood a massive pagoda, with an Azure Dragon embossed across its outer structure. Everyone who gazed upon the building instinctively knew it was connected to the Dragon Army.

As he advanced toward the Dragon Army's headquarters, Yan Xiaobao managed to reign in his anger. Though his heart raged, outwardly his expression remained composed, collected, and cold. Yet his clenched fists betrayed his emotions; he couldn't entirely suppress his fury.

Soon, the young white-haired boy reached the Dragon-decorated building. Arriving at its entrance, he was greeted by four groups of guards standing vigilantly, denying anyone passage.

"Outsiders have no entry," one guard stated firmly in a tone steeped in disdain, his gaze fixed upon the white-haired youth. Like most in the cave, they regarded Yan Xiaobao as an aberration—a spawn of Demon Beast and human. The deeper one ventured into the cave system, the more likely hybrid individuals like him could be found.

The deeper the dwellers delved into these tunnels, the higher their cultivation grade tended to be. Correspondingly, the tunnels became home to increasingly powerful magical inhabitants. In the innermost regions of the tunnels resided numerous Demon Beasts capable of taking human forms.

These shape-shifting Demon Beasts represented a pinnacle of demonic power within the tunnels, yet their offspring were often ostracized as beings that belonged neither to human nor Beast society. Some had savage appearances while others bore more human-like features.

Up to this moment, everyone who crossed paths with Yan Xiaobao regarded him as precisely one of these anomalies. Due to such prejudices, many saw him as beneath consideration.

Witnessing the guards' reactions before him, the white-haired boy didn't grow angry at them—nor did he care about why they held him in contempt. The only thought occupying his mind was finding his friends and rescuing them as quickly as possible.

With a wave of his hand, he unveiled a badge. Embedded within the badge was the mark of 'B', shimmering against its golden surface.

The guards' faces contorted in shock as they swiftly retreated, clearing a path for the white-haired boy. No longer did they look upon him with disdain; instead, their expressions transformed into reverence. Earning a B-ranked mission badge elevated him far above these lowly guards. Should fortune favor them, his mere action could lead to their immediate dismissal; should it disfavor them, it could cost them their lives.

Fortunately for the guards, Yan Xiaobao harbored no interest in them nor their petty behavior. His sole focus remained on saving his friends.

He ascended the staircase briskly, paying no heed to the now cringing guards as he headed to the first room within the building.

Inside, he encountered a counter where a person was stationed, presumably waiting for information or other members of the Dragon Army to arrive.

Without hesitation, Yan Xiaobao approached the counter. Once again, he flashed the B-ranked badge, causing a flicker of astonishment to cross the attendant's face. However, her expression quickly returned to neutrality.

"Sir, how may I assist you?" she asked politely, her full attention trained upon the individual before her.

"Earlier today—or perhaps yesterday—a group of three youths was likely brought here, one of whom is a half-demon beast. I need all three released and handed over to me."

Upon hearing this, the woman behind the counter briefly widened her gaze as she examined a set of documents and Memory Stones before her.

"I'm terribly sorry, sir," the woman apologized as she placed the documents to her side. "The three prisoners have already been transferred to the next tunnel. We can send a message to the next Dragon Army office to have them detained, but I'm unsure if your authorization suffices to make any substantial arrangements. I suspect the prisoners are ranked B or A. You may be able to obtain more information at the next Dragon Company office."

His rage spiked upon hearing this, but he willed himself to endure. Endurance would be necessary if he wanted to bring them back as swiftly as possible.

"Provide me with all your details regarding the three prisoners and ensure a message is sent to the next tunnel instructing them to await my arrival," Yan Xiaobao ordered steadily, his hand perfectly still as he accepted a Memory Stone containing the information about the detainees.

Without lingering in the office, Yan Xiaobao turned and left promptly, a fiery anger blazing in his chest. Descending the staircase, the guards scrambled to stay out of the path of the furious youth. Each intuitively sensed his hostility and dared not risk becoming the outlet for his wrath.

Charging down the stairs, Yan Xiaobao paid the guards no mind, seeing nothing but the route leading back to the courtyard where Xu Biao and Xie Lan were waiting for him.

For now, Yan Xiaobao didn't harbor even a shred of doubt about their loyalty to Zhou Long. His gaze grew even darker, his lips curling in a mixture of rage and indignation.

The ship he chartered sped across the water as fast as humanly possible. Throughout the journey, Yan Xiaobao fiddled with the Memory Stone in his hand. The temptation to press it against his forehead and glimpse its contents gnawed at him, yet he knew this was no action worth risking while in public view.

Finally, the ship docked at port, coming to a stop with the clang of three Demon Cores against its hull as Lei Yue sprinted toward the courtyard.

Entering the courtyard, he found Xie Lan and Xu Biao still waiting outside the building, at the same spot where they had paused earlier to see him off.

Without so much as glancing in their direction, Yan Xiaobao barreled into the house and rushed to his private chamber, where he sat down, crossed his legs, closed his eyes, and placed the Memory Stone against his forehead. A gentle glow emanated, but Yan Xiaobao paid it no heed as his mind filled with vivid images.

The memory revealed scenes of Sha Yun, Deng Wu, Wang Julong, Xie Lan, and Xu Biao inside a bustling restaurant. Alongside them were many others dining happily, smiles on their faces. As they laughed joyfully, a group of Dragon Clan members suddenly entered the establishment.

Yan Xiaobao watched as the Dragon Army demanded something, though the recording lacked audio, rendering the exact request ambiguous. Abruptly, the scene grew chaotic as the soldiers became hostile. When they appeared on the verge of hurting the man behind the counter, Xu Biao stood and shielded him from their aggression.

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Chapter 488 Profound and Enigmatic Meditation

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Seeing Xu Biao leap into the fray gained support from everyone else, and the battle abruptly broke out.

The Dragon Clan Team, composed of fifteen men, faced off against Yan Xiaobao's five friends. Although Xu Biao was accompanied by two King Ranking Experts, he quickly realized the opposing side had four King Ranking Experts. The battle was fierce, with Xu Biao and Xie Lan at a distinct disadvantage.

Meanwhile, his other three friends were struggling against the remaining eleven cultivators. Despite their counterattacks, it was only a matter of time before they were encircled.

In the end, Xu Biao brought out his B-tier badge, but unfortunately, the man standing before him was also a B-tier.

Several orders were spoken, yet once again, Yan Xiaobao was completely unable to decipher the words. Moments later, as he saw his friends bound in chains, his brows furrowed with deep agitation.

Xu Biao made a final effort to save them, but he was ultimately struck by the King Ranking Expert. As he attempted to pursue, Xie Lan pulled him back, her hands illuminated by green energy.

Watching Xu Biao suffer injuries, the other three friends faltered and refrained from taking action. This gave Yan Xiaobao an impression that their apparent submission stemmed from the threat of further harm to Xu Biao.

Seeing the situation unfold through the Memory Stone stirred complex emotions in Yan Xiaobao. Xu Biao and Xie Lan battled alongside other King's Experts, yet neither of them resorted to their strongest attacks nor exhausted their martial power and spiritual energy.

Xu Yue couldn't tell whether Xu Biao and Xie Lan had entered the battle fully aware of what might happen. But he quickly decided it didn't matter whether their actions were intentional or not.

His plan was to leave the beautiful Capital of Thousand River Cave as swiftly as possible. Without hesitation, he brought the two King-level Experts to his side. Knowing Zhou Long valued Yan Xiaobao's presence in the Demon Residence Cave immensely, the white-haired young man was certain that fewer assassins would come after him once he was isolated.

As for why they wanted to get rid of his friends, Yan Xiaobao remained in the dark. However, as his rage roiled within, his beautiful blue eyes had already darkened to a deep blue hue. His friends meant everything to him, and knowing they were now prisoners, fury erupted inside him like the raging Hell itself.

Yan Xiaobao quickly packed his belongings and knocked on Xu Biao's door, hearing the reply to enter moments later. With the creak of the door, the young man walked into the room.

"I'm leaving tonight," he announced, giving them the choice to follow him or stay in the capital. The two King Ranking Experts nodded. Xie Lan was still in the room, healing Xu Biao. She had just finished before Yan Xiaobao arrived at the door.

Without waiting to see their affirmative responses, Yan Xiaobao had already turned away and left, paying little attention to the two King-level Experts who were supposed to be his friends.

As he walked away, Yan Xiaobao knew that angering the two of them was not a wise move. Back in the room, the faces of the King Ranking Experts bore somber and conflicted expressions.

"I guess he saw right through us," Xu Biao deeply sighed. "But, although we planned for them to be taken, we did change our minds." He continued speaking in an attempt to justify his actions.

"I really didn't want our friends to be captured. We need to talk to him." He paused, gazing at the doorway through which Yan Xiaobao had passed earlier, his eyes showing determination.

Watching her boss grapple with issues of friendship, Xie Lan couldn't help but let out a profound sigh. Although she regarded Wang Julong as her disciple, there was only one person truly important to her—Xu Biao. Seeing him so distressed over friendship was something that left her both frustrated and helpless.

"Do you think he'll forgive you if you tell him everything?" Xie Lan asked curiously. She had always hated lying, and telling the truth was the only option she could think of.

Xu Biao nodded upon hearing her words. Honesty wasn't a bad idea. If anything, it could clear the air between them, leading to forgiveness and reconciliation—at least, that's what Xu Biao hoped for.

The Guild Master wasn't the only one troubled; Yan Xiaobao was uneasy as well. He trusted Xu Biao, even more than certain other things. After watching the recording, the severity of their final actions struck him deeply. If he hadn't suffered such serious injuries, he might have continued his efforts.

After some time, the two of them paused their thoughts and began preparing to depart for the next cave.

Three figures gathered at the exit of the courtyard, exchanging awkward glances. After a moment, Yan Xiaobao sighed heavily and allowed a faint smile to appear on his face.

"I'm sorry that your problems dragged you into all of this," he exhaled deeply, "I know you have certain ties to Zhou Long." With those words, the two King Ranking Experts exchanged a glance, visibly relieved that no further conversation was required on their end.

"Zhou Long hired us to send him updates every time we arrived at a cave. He also instructed us to look after you and ensure your safety. However, we were promised greater rewards if we managed to separate you from your friends."

"At first, we planned to do just that, but we've been together for so long..." Xu Biao looked regretful as he sighed deeply, "When I saw your friends being taken away, I finally decided where my loyalties lie."

As Yan Xiaobao listened, he couldn't help but feel that the man before him was being honest. Yet their history of mutual trust made it difficult to accept. Yan Xiaobao looked at him again and decided that whether he was truthful or not didn't matter. Ultimately, Zhou Long had ordered them to protect him so they could continue following him.

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After reaching this conclusion, Yan Xiaobao nodded as he walked toward a ship. Unlike the previous time, the ship he rented was not a small and sleek vessel designed for city travel but a large ship meant for navigating the waters of Thousand River Cave's Thousand Rivers.

He chose to ride the ship instead of walking because he wanted to cultivate as much as possible amidst the special dense atmosphere of this cave.

Renting this ship cost Yan Xiaobao a considerable amount of his Demon Core. However, his plan was to cultivate on the ship and then traverse the unlit portions of the tunnel to hone his abilities; this made the expense worthwhile. Although his body brimmed with energy, it was essential to balance the mental and physical aspects of training, as his body would otherwise fail to handle the energy contained within.

Xu Biao and Xie Lan joined him aboard the ship. Following the plan, Yan Xiaobao locked himself in one of the rooms, spending the entire journey in meditation. Each time he thought about his friends, his heart sank. They were currently branded as criminals, and when he worried about how his three friends might be treated, his heart ached.

He didn't allow himself to dwell excessively on the dangers his friends faced. Instead, he forced himself to focus on his training. Gradually, he entered into a deep and trance-like meditation.

In meditation, Yan Xiaobao could sense the elements surrounding him. Flames blossomed in his mind, the ground trembled beneath his feet, and metal tightly enveloped his core.

Yan Xiaobao perceived all three elemental energies around him and focused his entire being on merging and harmonizing with them.

During his month of meditation, Yan Xiaobao successfully fused earth with metal, but his attempt to integrate all three elements together now seemed overly ambitious.

The fusion of earth and metal allowed Yan Xiaobao to use metal to amplify any attack involving earth. It also enabled him to strengthen any metal-based attacks. However, what excited him the most was that he had summoned elemental fire.

The elemental flame Yan Xiaobao summoned bore a yellow-silver core. This yellow flame was less potent than the Blue Flame Yan Xiaobao could release with Lan Feng's help, but, unlike the blue flame, this yellow fire wasn't solely dedicated to burning enemies.

The yellow flame enhanced Yan Xiaobao's control over earth by one hundred percent, enabling him to command earth more effectively than before and to unleash attacks at a scale he previously couldn't maintain.

It wasn't limited to earth alone, but also included metal. This permitted him to exert one hundred percent control over metal as well. Although he currently wasn't relying on any metal-element-based attacks, he still needed the element to refine materials.

The more synchronicity achieved with an element, the harder it became to comprehend that element. Therefore, despite Yan Xiaobao's ability to command one percent more earth than before, he found it impossible to achieve perfect synchronization, thereby limiting his control.

At present, Yan Xiaobao had managed to synchronize the elements up to nearly seventy-five percent. He had already reached a challenging threshold where further synchronization became increasingly difficult—and increasingly dangerous.

All of this stemmed from synchronizing two out of his three elements, which doubled Yan Xiaobao's power compared to before.

Having spent the bulk of his month seated in meditation, Yan Xiaobao finally opened his eyes. Though he'd managed to heighten his Metal Element power, most of its attacks required inscriptions—a task for which he lacked the time. Consequently, he focused on enhancing his earth element. As he felt the world tremble around him, a smile appeared on his face. Wherever he focused his attention, he could feel the ground, sense the earth, and experience its impact on the world. He could feel the immense strength coursing through his body.

Leaving his room, he ascended to the deck and leaned against the ship's railing, gazing at the flowing river. Looking toward the path ahead, Yan Xiaobao spotted the cavern walls and the massive, open gate leading to the tunnel. The tunnel would guide him to the next cave, where his friends were waiting.

Whenever Yan Xiaobao thought of his friends, his blue eyes darkened, and impatience lingered around him, manifesting in the air. Initially, his plan was to traverse the unlit tunnel to confront various beasts and stabilize his cultivation base, but the more he thought, the more he yearned to rush through the tunnel.

Whenever he closed his eyes, he would see his friends' faces—scarred, tormented, and abused. His inner flames of rage never subsided; they burned constantly, filling the youth with fear and worry.

While he knew the only thing he could do now was endure, he also recognized how his prolonged simmering emotions consumed him. The only thing that somewhat calmed him was knowing that Deng Wu was there. Deng Wu would protect Wang Julong and Sha Yun.

Yan Xiaobao took a deep breath, shut his eyes, and forcefully suppressed his anger once more before turning around to find Xie Lan and Xu Biao staring at him with concern etched on their faces.

Seeing their worried expressions left him unsure whether to laugh or cry. These two King-level experts were as inscrutable as the heavens above. At times, they seemed calm and trustworthy, only to suddenly appear unreliable. Their betrayals had plunged the world of a white-haired man into chaos. Thus, Yan Xiaobao was still deciding whether he should trust these two King-level experts, even though he fully understood he might need their support when the situation demanded.

Although Yan Xiaobao's strength increased significantly during this Thousand Rivers journey, he remained incapable of facing a single King-level expert on his own. The deeper he ventured into the caves, the more Kings he would encounter.

Seeing that Xu Biao was gravely injured, Deng Wu immediately halted his counterattack. "Stop!" he said softly to Wang Julong and Sha Yun, both of whom ceased their struggles at once since they, too, noticed their good friend was injured protecting them.

After the Dragon Army members subdued Deng Wu and the two girls, they were transferred to the Dragon Army's main quarters, where they were locked in a room. They couldn't discern what the room was made of, but it was extremely formidable. No matter how many times Sha Yun slammed her tail into the walls or employed her fusion abilities, she couldn't break through them. Although the walls trembled under sheer force, her violent attacks didn't even create cracks, leading her to abandon her efforts.

All three had their hands bound, and their storage stones confiscated. While the Dragon Army couldn't access the storage stones due to their spiritual binding to their owners, they didn't dare leave the stones with the prisoners, fearing they might enable their escape.

With all his combat abilities stripped away and his storage stone removed, Deng Wu erupted in fury. As a Necromancer and Inscription Mage, most of his skills depended on inscriptions on scrolls. Although he was capable of infusing his spiritual energy and Metal Element Flames internally, it was insufficient to pose a threat to their captors.

For now, within their group, Sha Yun was the most significant threat to the abductors. As a Demon Beast of high rank with the ability to merge with Earth just as skillfully, the Snake Woman posed an enormous threat—one that the Dragon Clan dared not underestimate.

During the battle in the banquet hall, Sha Yun had been ferocious and relentless like the beast she was. She had killed some of the lower-level members of the Dragon Army. Now, her silver eyes burned with anger and indignation, radiating a savage aura around her.

If another altercation were to arise, Wang Julong would also remove Sha Yun's storage stone and confiscate her smaller seeds and other valuable items.

"Hey, boss," a voice called from outside the room. A young member of the Dragon Clan's delegation looked toward the captain of their team, the King Captain.

"Among the group we captured today, there are two beauties. Why not let the men enjoy a little pleasure on the journey back?" he asked, his eyes flickering with unspeakable desire, his tone full of temptation.

Looking at the obviously lecherous young soldier, the Captain merely snorted. "Li San, do you remember the rank of the experts accompanying the King?" the Captain asked in a cold voice.

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Chapter 490 Best to Heed the Warning

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The young man named Li San furrowed his brows slightly, recalling the seriously injured man who had brought the B-level emblem earlier that day. His face looked pale for a moment but quickly recovered to his usual arrogant expression.

"What if he is a B-level individual? Our team ranks well within the B category too. We are undoubtedly stronger than them. Our mission surpasses theirs and even their King's Experts, so we must be of greater importance."

Hearing this, the captain couldn't help but let out a sigh. He understood all too well that the power of a mission couldn't solely depend on the number of high-ranking individuals involved.

"The delegation mentioned that their team should have one more person," the captain explained again, "For now, don't touch them. Before deciding how to deal with them, I need to understand their mission. I forbid anyone from laying a finger on them."

With that, the captain left. Having spent a long time living in the caves, his experience far outstripped that of newcomers like Li San in the Dragon Clan. The captain had long understood that there were differences between two B-level missions. While his mission was important, it didn't mean the other's mission was less so. Even if he was ordered to, capturing some of their members might interfere with their critical task.

The captain sighed deeply, glancing at the door leading to the prisoners' room. His furrowed brows reflected his discomfort.

Initially, he had received a notification from the Dragon Army Office to go to a restaurant and arrest the three individuals. However, upon arrival, he noticed two King-level experts present—something he hadn't anticipated. Worse still, among those King Ranking experts, one turned out to be undertaking a B-level mission.

Retracting his gaze from the doorway, the captain couldn't help but shake his head. Though he was merely following orders, he felt an unsettling sense of discomfort. Having lived on the edge of the sword for so many years, he knew better than to ignore such ominous feelings. He immediately resolved to treat the three prisoners no differently than he treated his former captives, ensuring their safety and care. It was, after all, the reason he had earned his B-level status.

Inside their seats, the three individuals overheard the conversation between the captain and Li San. Upon hearing that they would be treated well, they breathed a slight sigh of relief; however, as they were still prisoners, it was impossible for them to feel optimistic.

"Everything will be fine," Deng Wu said with a reassuring smile as he looked at the two girls, "Yue will come for us. And it seems, for now, no one will touch us."

Hearing this, the worry in the eyes of Sha Yun and Wang Julong shifted from fear to hope, and from hope to determination. Smiling at Deng Wu, the two nodded.

"That's true," Sha Yun glanced at Wang Julong and said, "He would never leave us behind."

The three of them remained quiet for a long time, sitting in the cell while training. No one could tell whether a single hour or four had passed. Suddenly, the door opened, and a young man with an angry expression appeared in the doorway. His eyes shone with a sinister gleam, his lips curled as he snarled at the three prisoners, "Move it!" he shouted, then followed behind them, guiding the three prisoners through the building and out to the waiting convoy.

One of the carriages was tightly sealed, appearing to contain something crucial. Its door was surrounded by a crowd of cultivators, their eyes vigilant, spears tightly gripped.

"Stop staring!" the man behind them hissed, raising his spear in a threatening manner. He led the three toward an open carriage. Unlike the previous one, this one had windows, and the three were quickly ordered inside.

Inside the carriage, Deng Wu froze as he noticed it was filled with soldiers. A sharp shove from a spear scraping his back forced him forward despite his hesitation.

His dark eyes turned even darker. Quickly, he positioned Wang Julong in one corner while taking a seat beside her, opposite Sha Yun. Though bound in handcuffs, Sha Yun retained a palpable defiance—if any soldier dared provoke her, they would swiftly regret it.

Knowing violence could worsen their situation, Deng Wu recalled the captain's words and understood he sought to avoid any trouble.

Before long, the three had settled in the carriage, which began moving forward, leaving behind the Dragon Company headquarters in the depths of Thousand River Cave.

Deng Wu sighed deeply, gazing out the window, and silently prayed that Yan Xiaobao would find them and that they wouldn't be taken too far.

By the time Yan Xiaobao realized his friends were missing, the carriage convoy had already departed the city. The trio of carriages advanced slowly toward the tunnels, day by day pressing onward.

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A small boat docked beside a tiny harbor at the entrance of the tunnel, adjacent to a small city. It stood before the tunnel gates. At this moment, Yan Xiaobao felt his heart churning, his only tangible emotion being worry. He kept blaming himself for not joining his friends for dinner, instead burying himself in training. Meanwhile, he realized that without Lan Feng's assistance, he was powerless against the four King-level experts.

Without waiting for the two Kings to follow, Yan Xiaobao, the white-haired young man, immediately navigated through the city and paid the toll to enter the tunnel.

