

# THE QUEST FOR IMMORTALITY

## Chapter 4: The Fire-Resisting Hairpin

The market is a place for low-level cultivators to trade cultivation items, offering a miscellaneous array of items including pills, array formations, and spiritual tools, though generally of low grade and mixed quality.

As the New Year approaches, the market is bustling with many cultivators coming and going, creating a noisy atmosphere.

Mo Hua heads straight to a small stall at the end of the street. The stall owner, an elderly man surnamed Sun, known to acquaintances as Old Sun, has a son who works in Wanbao Building. Occasionally, his son gets some substandard goods that Wanbao Building doesn't want and sells them cheaply to his father for street vending.

Old Sun, hawking his wares, looks up to see Mo Hua running towards him, his pale face flushed with exertion, and can't help but tease:

"Little brother, what spiritual tool are you here to look at today? Don't tell me you're just looking and not buying again..."

With a wave of his hand, Mo Hua declares, "Buying!"

Old Sun wonders, "Isn't it a few days till New Year's? Did your family give you your New Year's money so early?"

Mo Hua responds, slightly annoyed, "What New Year's money? This is money I've earned myself!" He pats his pocket as he speaks.

Hearing the clear sound of spirit stones clinking in the pocket, Old Sun perks up and eagerly says:

"I have all kinds of pills, arrays, and tools here, all beautiful and affordable, guaranteed satisfaction, and all from Wanbao Building, so you know the quality is top-notch. What are you looking to buy?"

If the quality was really top-notch, Wanbao Building would sell it themselves, but Mo Hua isn't concerned; he can't afford Wanbao Building's prices anyway.

"Do you have any fire-resisting spiritual tools?"

Old Sun, with a knowing look, pulls out a burlap bag and spreads it out in front of Mo Hua.

"You mentioned this a few days ago, and I paid attention. I went back and specifically found a few excellent fire-resisting tools, all portable and beautifully designed. What do you think?"

Mo Hua is surprised at Old Sun's preparedness, a testament to decades of market experience, always ready to seize a business opportunity.

The spiritual tools displayed before Mo Hua vary in style: there are rings, jade pendants, lampstands, and even a hood and a scarf... By the looks of it, his stall is the most well-stocked in the market.

After a careful examination, Mo Hua picks up a hairpin, antique in design yet delicate, and asks, "What is this pin?"

Old Sun explains, "This is a fire-resisting hairpin, a standard-issue spiritual tool. It's made to a uniform standard, with a basic fire-resisting array carved on it. It needs to be charged with spirit stones, and when activated, it can isolate fire qi, keeping the wearer cool. Though it consumes spirit stones, one stone can last three months, making it quite economical..."

Mo Hua looks doubtful, "A standard-issue tool from Wanbao Building being sold here must have some defects, right?"

Old Sun laughs, "You know quite a bit. If there were no defects, it would be twice as expensive at Wanbao Building. But saying it has defects is not quite right..."

Pointing at the peony pattern on the pin, Old Sun continues, "The craftsman added a few extra strokes while engraving this peony, so it didn't meet the standard and was categorized as a second-grade item. But the array inside is intact, and its effectiveness remains the same."

Mo Hua nods, feeling this pin is the most suitable, and asks, "How many spirit stones?"

Old Sun strokes his beard, "A flat rate, fifteen spirit stones!"

Mo Hua shakes his head, "Five!"

Old Sun's eyes widen, "Who taught you to bargain like this?"

Mo Hua, a bit embarrassed, "I heard it at other stalls, that's how they all haggle..."

Old Sun laments, "The times are indeed changing for the worse, even good kids are getting corrupted!" Then he says, "Fourteen stones, I can't go any lower." 〔ㄹㄱ〕ㄴㄴㄴ

Mo Hua tentatively offers, "Six?"

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After some haggling, they settle on ten stones.

Old Sun feels he can't go any lower, not a single spirit stone less, and Mo Hua, having inquired about the prices at other stalls, knows there's no cheaper deal, so he agrees.

Old Sun takes the spirit stones from Mo Hua and wraps the hairpin in a cheap but nicely made paper box, handing it over while constantly muttering:

"If my grandson were half as clever as you, I'd have him man the stall, but alas, my grandson is too

simple, barely speaks to strangers."

Mo Hua, satisfied with the purchase, waves goodbye to Old Sun and walks away with a spring in his step.

A nearby stall owner chuckles, "Old Sun, you lost money this time!"

Old Sun strokes his beard, "Not really, just made a little less."

The stall owner, curious, asks, "Ten spirit stones is no small sum, I wonder who the kid bought the hairpin for."

"Fire-resisting hairpins are for resisting the qi of the stove, who else could it be for?"

Watching Mo Hua's figure gradually receding into the distance, Old Sun sighs softly, "He's a good kid."

Mo Hua's home is on a quiet street at the edge of Tongxian City. The house is old and just big enough for a family of three. The neighborhood is mostly inhabited by low-level Qi-cultivating loose cultivators who make a living by doing odd jobs. Although not wealthy, the community is vibrant with everyday life.

As evening falls, smoke rises from the houses, and dim lights flicker.

Mo Hua rushes through the door, calling, "Mom, I'm back!"

A plainly dressed woman with a gentle face steps out from the inner room. Seeing Mo Hua, her eyes light up with surprise, and she pulls him close, touching his head and pinching his face, before saying, "Have you been working too hard at cultivation? You've lost a lot of weight."

Mo Hua replies, "I haven't lost weight," and then takes out the box, "Mom, this is for you!"

The woman, momentarily stunned, opens the box to find a hairpin.

"This is a fire-resisting hairpin. You work in the kitchen at the inn, and being exposed to the heat for long periods isn't good for your health. This pin can shield you from the heat, making you feel much cooler."

The woman, named Liu Ruhua, is Mo Hua's mother and a low-level Qi-cultivating loose cultivator in Tongxian City.

Life as a loose cultivator is tough, and there aren't many good opportunities to earn spirit stones, especially for those with children. Raising a child, covering living expenses, and affording the materials needed for cultivation pose significant challenges for ordinary cultivators.

Liu Ruhua has good culinary skills and helps in the kitchen of a small inn in the city.

Larger inns usually use stoves crafted by artisans, which consume spirit stones to convert spiritual energy into cooking heat.

To save costs, smaller inns do not use spirit stones for cooking but instead have cultivators with fire spiritual roots use their spiritual power to generate cooking heat. Over time, this can harm the body, drying out the meridians and causing symptoms like lung pain and dry coughs.

As Liu Ruhua works in the kitchen, she periodically uses her spiritual power to provide heat, earning about thirty spirit stones a month. Although it harms her health, it's considered a decent job for loose cultivators, many of whom would like the opportunity but don't get it.

Looking at the hairpin in her hand, Liu Ruhua presses her lips together, silent.

Mo Hua quickly adds, "The spirit stones for the hairpin were earned by helping fellow disciples, no cheating, stealing, or robbing involved!"

Liu Ruhua can't help but smile, feeling warm yet slightly teary, "I can't accept this hairpin, dear. You're still young, and you'll need many spirit stones for your future cultivation. Save them. I can take care of myself; you don't need to worry..."

Mo Hua confidently says, "We can worry about the future later. Maybe I'll become a great cultivator at the Golden Core or Nascent Soul stage one day, and then I'll have as many spirit stones as I need."

Liu Ruhua laughs, tapping Mo Hua's forehead, "At such a young age, you've already learned to boast."

"Mom, please keep it. I bargained with others for a long time to buy it. If you don't take it, then I wasted all that effort."

Mo Hua then takes the hairpin and carefully inserts it into Liu Ruhua's hair, then runs to get a mirror.

"Look, does it look good?"

Seeing the reflection of the woman in the mirror, adorned with the simple yet elegant hairpin, and looking graceful and beautiful, Liu Ruhua's heart softens, and she gently says, "I'll keep the hairpin. But next time, I won't accept any more gifts."

"Okay," Mo Hua nods repeatedly, "Mom, is dinner ready? I'm hungry."

"Yes, it's all your favorite dishes, eat up!"

Liu Ruhua is an excellent cook, and although the dishes are simple and lack spiritual essence, they are delicately and deliciously prepared. After eating and chatting with his mother, Mo Hua returns to his room to read.

After midnight, Mo Hua enters his sea of knowledge and practices array formations on the Dao Stele all night. When he wakes, it's dawn.

Mo Hua sits cross-legged, holding a spirit stone, continuing his routine cultivation practice.

When he opens his eyes again, the sky is slightly bright, and the beautiful morning sunlight shines into the room. Mo Hua stretches lazily in bed, preparing to get up, then hears heavy footsteps outside.

Mo Hua rolls over and peers through the door crack, seeing a man covered in bloodstains and looking exhausted step into the house — it's Mo Hua's father, Mo Shan.