

The Quest 108

Chapter 108: Progress

Mo Hua often visited Mr. Zhuang's Sit and Forget Abode whenever he had free time, to spar with Bai Zisheng in the art of movement.

Bai Zisheng was quick to understand; with each session, his movements became more refined. However, Mo Hua's progress was notably swifter.

Initially, Bai Zisheng had the upper hand, but as Mo Hua's Passing Water Step became more adept, within twenty rounds, Bai Zisheng found it increasingly difficult to snatch the jade pendant hanging around Mo Hua's neck.

To extend their practice, they decided to increase the rounds from twenty to forty.

"Something's off..." Bai Zisheng frowned after one such session.

"What do you mean?" asked Mo Hua.

"Your technique, it's somewhat sinister..." Mo Hua looked puzzled.

"It seems ordinary enough, nothing remarkable at first glance, but it's slippery as an eel. Just when you think you've got it, with a flicker, it slips right through your fingers, impossible to grasp."

"Isn't that the very proof that this technique is anything but ordinary?" Mo Hua countered.

Bai Zisheng shook his head. "This technique essentially uses spiritual power to guide the body, but there are many such techniques and I've never encountered one so tricky."

Mo Hua didn't understand. "Isn't it just about using spiritual awareness to direct spiritual power through certain meridians and acupoints to move the body? How is that difficult?"

It wasn't necessarily difficult, but to control spiritual power with such precision and finesse using one's spiritual awareness was not simple at all.

Bai Zisheng gave Mo Hua another look. At this point, Mo Hua was at the fifth level of Qi cultivation, but his spiritual awareness was sufficient to draw eight array patterns. He had watched Mo Hua draw array formations; his strokes were as swift as a dragon or snake, and he could complete a formation of six or seven patterns in no time.

Bai Zisheng hesitated, unsure whether the peculiarity lay in the technique or in Mo Hua himself.

However, he didn't dwell on it. In the realm of cultivation, there were myriad techniques and practitioners, and some indeed excelled in certain arts more than others.

Mo Hua's ability to match Bai Zisheng, even with suppressed cultivation levels, was more a cause for joy than concern.

From then on, Bai Zisheng would complete his studies early each day and sit under the large pagoda tree, waiting for Mo Hua to join him for their sparring sessions.

Then one day, Bai Zisheng asked, "Did you learn this movement technique to dodge spells from cultivators?"

"Yes," Mo Hua nodded, "and from demonic beasts as well."

He might venture into the Dahei Mountain someday, where the demonic beasts were far more formidable than any cultivator.

"You might want to practice against demonic beasts too," Bai Zisheng suggested, taking a bite of his meat.

"Ah?" Mo Hua was momentarily stunned.

"The attacks of demonic beasts are different from those of human cultivators. You might be able to dodge a cultivator, but not necessarily a demonic beast."

"That's true," Mo Hua realized.

Demonic beasts were larger, had stronger bodies, sharper claws and teeth, and most moved on all fours, making their attack trajectories quite different from those of cultivators.

Moreover, some demonic beasts specialized in using their poisonous tails, spines, saliva, and jagged teeth, making their attacks even more bizarre and tricky.

Mo Hua scratched his head, "But I don't have a demonic beast to practice with, and I'd rather not end up being eaten by one..."

"I'm just saying, keep an eye out," Bai Zisheng mentioned casually.

Mo Hua, however, took it to heart.

He estimated his chances of being killed by a cultivator versus a demonic beast.

He concluded that being killed by a demonic beast was more likely.

Dahei Mountain was notoriously treacherous, its beasts fierce and cunning.

"Perhaps I should try becoming a Demon Hunter?" Mo Hua thought, then decided against it.

A few days later, Mo Hua was at an eatery reading a book on arrays.

He had mastered drawing formations with eight array patterns and, to save on spirit ink, did not practice daily, opting instead to read about arrays.

His frequent sparring sessions with Bai Zisheng had also become less frequent.

Aunt Xue, upon learning about their sparring, was mildly annoyed, believing Bai Zisheng was being overly playful and distracting Mo Hua from his studies in array formation. She assigned more tasks to Bai Zisheng.

Mo Hua tried to intercede on Bai Zisheng's behalf, claiming the initiative for their sparring came from his own desire to practice movement techniques.

But Aunt Xue didn't buy it

; she knew Mo Hua's constitution was naturally weak and couldn't believe he would suddenly take up physical techniques. Thinking Mo Hua was making excuses for Bai Zisheng, she said, "Good child, I know you mean well for the young master, but without rules, there can be no standards."

After speaking with Mo Hua, Aunt Xue went and assigned even more tasks to Bai Zisheng.

Helpless, Mo Hua could only occasionally bring some food for Bai Zisheng as a form of comfort.

Zhang Lan, who used to frequent the eatery, seemed suddenly busy with other matters and had not been seen for some time.

This left Mo Hua with a lot of quiet time to himself, just to read his books on arrays.

One day, while Mo Hua was alone with his book, Aunt Jiang brought him a bowl of hot chicken soup to enjoy while it was still warm.

Aunt Jiang, whose given name was Yun and whose husband, Mr. Chu, was a Demon Hunter who had been severely injured during a hunt, leaving the family without an income and a child who often went hungry. Liu Ruhua had her come to the eatery to help out, and their financial situation gradually improved, reflecting in her healthier complexion.

Her husband, although no longer able to hunt demonic beasts, was skilled with traps and occasionally caught small demonic beasts in the mountains, selling them for spirit stones to help support the family. Sometimes, he even captured spiritual beasts that had escaped from clans or sects and had turned somewhat demonic, losing much of their spiritual essence but still better than the meat of ordinary demonic beasts.

Aunt Jiang would stew these spiritual beasts into delicious soups, always setting aside some especially for Mo Hua.

Aunt Jiang was skilled with pastries and had learned culinary arts from Liu Ruhua; her dishes were quite tasty.

"Thank you, Aunt Jiang!" Mo Hua gratefully sipped the savory chicken soup.

Aunt Jiang was pleased, though she was shy with words and merely smiled bashfully.

"By the way, how did that Wood Binding Array I gave Uncle Chu work out?"

Mo Hua suddenly remembered and asked.

"Ah, yes, it works well," Aunt Jiang nodded. "Every time your Uncle Chu returns from the mountains, he praises how useful that array is. Now, the demonic beasts caught in his traps don't damage their fur as much."

Beasts trapped often thrashed and bit around, damaging their pelts which then couldn't fetch much in terms of spirit stones.

After hearing this, Mo Hua had searched in the Thousand Arrays Compendium for a Wood Binding Array that could restrain a demonic beast. Although activating the array required a spirit stone, an undamaged pelt from a demonic beast could sell for much more.

"There is just one thing..." Aunt Jiang hesitated.

"Is there a problem with the array?" Mo Hua asked.

"No, no," Aunt Jiang waved her hand. "It's not the array. It's about a young demonic beast your Uncle Chu caught. It was trapped for several days and surprisingly didn't die. He brought it back, but now he doesn't know what to do with it..."

"A young demonic beast?"

Mo Hua's eyes lit up.