

The Quest 22

Chapter 22: Clues

Yan Jiaoxi left the Array Pavilion and returned to Tongming Peak at the Tongxian Sect.

Each instructor at the Tongxian Sect had their own residence on Tongming Peak, consisting of three rooms and a living hall, complete with a small courtyard where one could cultivate spiritual plants or rear spiritual beasts.

Yan Jiaoxi's residence was clean and tidy, with array diagrams neatly pasted all over the walls, devoid of any other decorations.

He reviewed the basic array manuals, preparing several array patterns he was to teach later in the month, and then began grading the array assignments submitted by the Qi-cultivation disciples.

Nearly a thousand disciples at the Tongxian Sect's Tongxuan Peak were under his supervision, and he meticulously corrected each of their array assignments, marking any errors.

This task was time-consuming and required patience, but Yan Jiaoxi was meticulous in his work, a habit ingrained by his master's teachings over the years.

His master, a first-grade Array master, might not have been the most outstanding in the cultivation world, but he devoted his life to teaching and passing on the Dao of arrays in accordance with the heavenly principles.

Now that his master had passed, Yan Jiaoxi, having become an instructor himself, could appreciate his master's painstaking efforts.

As evening approached, Yan Jiaoxi lit a lamp and continued grading the arrays.

The Tongxian Sect was still a small and remote sect with weak cultivation heritage. Among the thousand disciples, only a few could draw the basic array patterns properly.

Those who did well usually came from learned families or were from wealthy households willing to spend spirit stones on their education, such as children of officials serving at the Dao Court, children of sect elders, or disciples from cultivation families within the city.

Very few from poor, unaffiliated cultivator backgrounds managed to excel in array drawing.

Regardless of their background, Yan Jiaoxi judged them solely on their arrays. He would add detailed comments to those who tried hard but lacked skill; for those who performed poorly and with a lackadaisical attitude, his comments were stern, and he took note of their names. Occasionally, when a disciple drew an excellent array, he felt reassured and would write "Excellent" next to their work, encouraging them with a larger character than usual.

Diligently grading, Yan Jiaoxi's interest was piqued by a particular array diagram. The strokes were proficient, clearly the result of considerable practice, and showed a mastery of the principles, even suitable for official array creation.

He looked up at the scroll, which bore the name "Mo Hua," and nodded in approval before writing "Excellent" next to the array.

As he continued grading, he revisited Mo Hua's diagram, his brow furrowed in thought. The proficiency seemed almost too polished, even effortless. For a disciple at the second or third level of Qi cultivation, simply being able to complete an array diagram was an achievement.

Reflecting on a recent encounter at the Array Pavilion with Mo Hua, Yan Jiaoxi pondered silently, a question emerging: "Does Mo Hua have an elder brother?"

"If his brother is also skilled in arrays, that would suggest a familial learning, but if I recall correctly, Mo Hua comes from a poor, unaffiliated background. A family with a tradition in arrays wouldn't be impoverished..."

"He could be helping the Array Pavilion with diagrams, indicating significant talent in arrays. Having taught at Tongxian Sect for nearly a decade, I don't recall instructing anyone like that... Could he be from another sect? That seems unlikely, as brothers generally join the same sect, especially since Tongxian Sect is the largest in the city..."

Tapping his fingers on the desk, Yan Jiaoxi momentarily set aside his thoughts and focused on finishing the grading.

The next day, Yan Jiaoxi rose early and sought out the steward of Tongming Peak for a list of disciples' origins. Upon finding Mo Hua's entry, it read:

Mo Hua: Age 10, Qi cultivation level 3, lower-mid grade minor Five Elements spiritual root...

Father: Mo Shan, Demon Hunter; Mother: Liu Ruhua, Meal Preparer.

Apart from his parents, he had no other relatives, certainly no elder brother.

Yan Jiaoxi felt a hunch but found it unlikely.

During the morning array class, he announced an impromptu assignment: draw all the Five Elements array patterns they had learned and submit them in three days.

The disciples, shocked by the sudden task, reacted as if struck by frost.

Mo Hua, however, was indifferent. Having already assisted the Array Pavilion with array diagrams, drawing a few more was trivial.

But why had Yan Jiaoxi suddenly assigned this work? It was uncharacteristic of him.

Puzzled, Mo Hua was then approached by An Xiaofu

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"Mo Hua, you must help me!" An Xiaofu almost cried out.

"Why has the instructor suddenly assigned this homework? Usually, it's only every few months that we get tested on our array skills."

Caught off-guard and unable to draw a single pattern due to the tight deadline, An Xiaofu had no choice but to seek Mo Hua's help.

For Mo Hua, these basic array patterns were no longer challenging.

He helped An Xiaofu draw the arrays, charging only a friendship price. Several other well-off but less skilled fellow disciples also sought Mo Hua's assistance, which he readily provided.

With arrays to draw and spirit stones to earn, Mo Hua had little else on his mind.

Three days later, when the array assignments were submitted, Yan Jiaoxi picked out the diagrams drawn by Mo Hua and inspected them thoroughly before storing them in his bag and heading to Destiny's Shop to find the stout steward.

The stout steward was wary upon seeing Yan Jiaoxi. "Are you here for tea or to have me do something?"

"Just to ask you something," Yan Jiaoxi replied, relieving the steward's anxiety.

"Do you still have the array diagrams Mo Hua submitted to you?"

"Mo Hua?" the steward paused, then remembered, "Oh, that young man. Yes, I do. What about them?"

"How many are there?"

"A few of each, the Blazing Fire Array and the Earth Solidification Array. I keep them as spares."

The steward handed over the diagrams Mo Hua had previously submitted for the Blazing Fire Array and the Earth Solidification Array to Yan Jiaoxi.

After comparing them with the array homework, Yan Jiaoxi took a deep breath.

The steward, curious, asked, "What are you looking at?"

Yan Jiaoxi pointed to the array patterns and the diagrams, asking, "Do you think these patterns and these two diagrams were drawn by the same person?"

The steward examined them closely, furrowing his brow before nodding, "The stroke work is quite similar, likely from the same person..."

Thinking aloud, the steward suddenly asked, "Have you met Mo Hua's elder brother?"

"There is no elder brother."

"No elder brother? Then who drew these arrays?"

Yan Jiaoxi gave the steward a meaningful look.

Stunned, the steward scoffed, "Are you suggesting he drew them himself?"

"That might be possible with the Blazing Fire Array, but the Earth Solidification Array includes four patterns. Where would he get so much spiritual sense? Does he have two heads and two consciousness seas?"

Doubtfully eyeing Yan Jiaoxi, the steward continued, "Are you saying you've taught a Qi-cultivation level three prodigy who can draw arrays? You're not trying to glorify yourself, are you? I've known you for years, and you're not that kind of person."

Yan Jiaoxi coldly responded, pointing at the diagrams, "You yourself said these patterns and these diagrams come from the same person. If these patterns were drawn by Mo Hua, then who drew these diagrams?"

Silenced, the steward stared at the array patterns and diagrams for a long time before murmuring, "No way..."