

The Quest 51

Chapter 51: Hidden Wood

The next day, Mr. Zhuang, unusually, did not sleep in. Upon seeing Mo Hua, he gestured for him to come over. "Mo Hua, follow me."

Mr. Zhuang led Mo Hua to his study and asked, "How many times have you practiced the Tripartite Array?"

Mo Hua felt genuinely grateful to Mr. Zhuang and did not want to conceal anything. However, the matter of the Dao Stele was a bit mystical, and he felt it was not right to speak openly about it. Yet, he also did not want to lie, so he honestly replied:

"Sir, I practiced it on paper three or four times, and then another seven or eight times in my dreams."

He spoke the truth but omitted mentioning the Dao Stele.

Mr. Zhuang was momentarily stunned. "In your dreams?"

"Yes," Mo Hua said. "After I fall asleep, I can continue to work on the arrays in my dreams."

Mr. Zhuang furrowed his brows and looked at Mo Hua, only to find his expression sincere and his gaze so clear that it seemed to reflect one's own image.

Mr. Zhuang chuckled, "I see."

What did he see...

Mo Hua looked at Mr. Zhuang, puzzled.

Mr. Zhuang pondered for a moment, then advised Mo Hua:

"This conversation stays between us. Should anyone else inquire, you need not respond, and certainly don't mention practicing arrays in dreams."

"What if someone insists on probing further?"

"If they do, you tell them as I've said before, it's because you learned Meditation Techniques, which is why you grasp arrays quickly."

"And if they ask for the method of the Meditation Techniques?"

Mr. Zhuang casually said, "If you can avoid giving it, do so. If they insist on taking it by force, you may have to fight them. If you cannot defeat them or escape, then hand over the technique. Techniques are mere external things; your life is what truly matters."

Mo Hua thought it over and found it reasonable, but still asked:

"What if someone learns the Meditation Techniques and finds it doesn't help them learn arrays faster?"

"In that case..."

Mr. Zhuang thought for a bit, then said, "You can only claim that you have an exceptional talent, an eidetic memory that allows you to master arrays after a few glances. And remember, when you say this, you must be arrogant. Adopt a disdainful demeanor as if you are a rare genius."

"A disdainful demeanor?"

"I'll show you. Watch and learn."

With that, Mr. Zhuang's usual languid demeanor transformed. He seemed like a dragon rousing from rest, full of proud and disdainful grandeur.

After the display, Mr. Zhuang's demeanor relaxed again, and he told Mo Hua:

"Like that, try to practice it when you have time."

Mo Hua was deeply impressed.

Mr. Zhuang usually exuded an air of sage-like grace, but when it came to bluffing, he was remarkably adept.

Alone by the pond, Mo Hua tried to mimic the arrogant stance, chest puffed out and waist pinched, but he never quite matched Mr. Zhuang's imposing aura.

"Cultivation is a profound learning, it seems not just about skills and arrays, but other things are also worth learning from the master."

Mo Hua resolved to master this act of pretense whenever he had the chance.

As the evening wore on and dusk approached, Mo Hua bid farewell to Mr. Zhuang and headed home.

After Mo Hua left, Mr. Zhuang lay on a lounge chair in the bamboo pavilion, lost in thought. Elder Gui played chess by himself.

A breeze swept through the pavilion, and after a long silence, Mr. Zhuang suddenly said, "This is not good."

Elder Gui lifted his eyelids, "What's not good?"

"That boy Mo Hua..."

Elder Gui gave Mr. Zhuang a look, "Do you think he wasn't telling the truth?"

"Whether he told the truth or not doesn't matter, there are some things that should not be said."

"Why is that a problem?"

"He learns too quickly," Mr. Zhuang frowned.

Elder Gui was slightly taken aback, "Didn't you already say that?"

Mr. Zhuang continued, "He's my registered disciple. Learning too fast can attract trouble."

Elder Gui placed a piece on the board, "But he's not that quick-witted, his talents and comprehension are far inferior to yours at his age. Even compared to many scions of great families, he still lacks much."

Mr. Zhuang shook his head, "You can't compare like that. Great families have their own heritage and teachings. Even a pig, under their influence, would learn arrays faster than normal. As for me..."

Mr. Zhuang spoke calmly,

"In the world of cultivation, those with better innate talent for arrays than me are few, so it's normal for others to be inferior."

It was a shame there was no audience; Elder Gui continued playing chess, uninterested in lifting his head.

Mr. Zhuang felt a bit nostalgic for Mo Hua's presence; his bright, admiring eyes always understood.

Mr. Zhuang sighed,

"Mo Hua is different. Being an independent cultivator with no family background or legacy, his foundational knowledge in arrays is weak. If his proficiency in arrays advances too quickly, it could attract unwanted attention or even danger."

"You're being cautious for once, that's rare," Elder Gui smirked.

Mr. Zhuang stretched lazily, "The tree that stands out in the forest is the one that gets blown down by the wind. I used to not understand the wisdom of keeping a low profile, and that's why I suffered losses."

"So what do you plan to do? Stop teaching him?"

Mr. Zhuang lay back in his chair, tapping his fingers on the armrest, "I have to keep teaching him. He's my disciple, even if not by direct transmission. I can't just teach him a little; otherwise, it would damage my reputation and disgrace my sect."

Elder Gui remarked, "You didn't care about such superficial honors before."

"People care about their image as they age," Mr. Zhuang replied.

Elder Gui looked at the languid Mr. Zhuang, "I don't think that's it."

Mr. Zhuang ignored Elder Gui, closed his eyes, seeming to ponder, yet also like he was dozing off.

Elder Gui continued to play chess as usual.

As the night deepened and the evening wind rustled through the mountains, the trees whispered softly.

Mr. Zhuang suddenly opened his eyes, gazing into the wooded mountains under the night sky, and murmured,

"A tree stands out in the forest, and the wind will destroy it... If the tree does not stand out, the wind cannot touch it."

Elder Gui looked puzzled.

Mr. Zhuang's gaze swept across the trees and then rested on the front gate of the courtyard.

Every morning, the Bai siblings would come up the mountain to visit.

Those two children were exceptionally talented, the finest of the woods.

The next morning, just as usual, the Bai siblings arrived at the gate to pay their respects, but unlike other days, the usually closed bamboo gate suddenly swung open.

At the same time, the sign "Sit and Forget Abode" appeared above the gate.

Behind the gate was a courtyard with locust trees reaching to the sky, small bridges over flowing waters, clouds swirling, brimming with an air of mysticism.

Bai Zisheng was stunned as he said,

"Aunt Xue... The gate is open, does Mr. Zhuang wish to see us now?"

The usually calm Aunt Xue was also emotionally stirred, "It seems so."

She thought to herself,

"If Mr. Zhuang is willing to see us, that's good. Even if he doesn't take the young master and young mistress as disciples now, they can at least serve by his side. With their talents, Mr. Zhuang will surely agree eventually."

Bai Zisheng looked tentatively at his sister and noticed Bai Zixi's delicate face as usual showed no extra emotion.

A trace of sympathy flashed in Bai Zisheng's eyes, then he quietly stepped in front of his sister and walked into the courtyard.