

THE QUEST FOR IMMORTALITY

Chapter 7: Destiny's Shop

A signboard hung in front of the business premises, inscribed with the words "Destiny's Shop."

The interior was compact and somewhat rudimentary, adorned with array formations of various patterns. Some arrays seemed to have been hanging there for a while, their ink slightly faded.

The counter was relatively high, and seated atop it was a middle-aged, somewhat portly cultivator with a clean-shaven face, who appeared to be the manager of the shop.

A bell hung from the doorframe, ringing crisply as Mo Hua entered.

The chubby manager, who had been dozing off with half-closed eyes, was startled awake by the bell. He looked around, saw no one at first, and was about to get angry when he lowered his head and spotted a small head peering over the counter.

The manager paused, noticing Mo Hua was alone, and then spoke, "Young man, where are your parents?"

Mo Hua shook his head, "I'm not here for my parents, I'm here for you."

The manager paused again, "You're looking for me? What for?"

"Do you need someone to help draw array formations?"

The manager found this amusing and teased, "What? You, a little guy, can draw arrays?"

Mo Hua replied modestly, "A little."

Laughing, the manager said, "A little won't do. You need at least to be at the sixth level of Qi cultivation, possess a sect's learning jade slip, be an Array apprentice, have an Array master as a teacher, and also pay a deposit before you can draw arrays for us."

Mo Hua was taken aback; he hadn't known about these many requirements, none of which he met.

Quickly thinking, Mo Hua said, "Alright, I lied. I'm not very good, I'm helping my brother with it."

The manager didn't mind, asking, "What does your brother do?"

"My brother is an Array apprentice, studying under an Array master and helps draw basic arrays for shops like this to earn some ink and paper money. He's too busy with his studies, so I run errands for him."

Mo Hua then slightly altered the identity of a distant uncle from the Meng family to fit the story.

The manager stroked his chin, pondered for a moment but then refused, "No, verbal assurances aren't enough. If your brother wants to draw arrays for our shop, he has to come himself."

Mo Hua quickly added, "Do you also require a deposit?"

The manager nodded, "Correct."

"The deposit, does it cover the cost of the array patterns and the materials needed to draw them? If so, even if I lied and you took the deposit, you'd merely be selling an array and materials at a fair price—not making a profit but not losing either."

Indeed, the deposit was higher than the cost of the materials, and as for the array patterns, they were just the simplest and most common, costing hardly any spirit stones. 果然，这笔押金比材料费高，至于阵法图案，它们只是最简单和最常见，花费的精神石几乎可以忽略不计。

Thinking this over, the manager hesitated.

"Is business not so good here?" Mo Hua then asked.

Business was indeed slow, with few customers each day, few arrays sold, and even fewer array masters, or apprentices, willing to draw for them, which explained the shop's quietness.

However, the manager wouldn't admit it, and held his head high, albeit a bit sheepishly.

Seeing his reaction, Mo Hua seized the opportunity, "My brother's arrays are very well-drawn, everyone says that in a few years, he'll definitely become an Array master. After another ten or twenty years, passing the qualification test, he might even become a first-grade Array master. Then he'll naturally help you draw more advanced arrays, and you'll profit, won't you?"

Qualification? That's not so easy.

The manager inwardly scoffed, but as the saying goes, don't despise the poor youth; who knows about the future. If he could become a first-grade Array master, indeed, it would be good to form a kind relationship for future favors.

Rules, well, they're mostly for show, as long as the arrays are drawn correctly.

"You make some sense," the manager said, "but you said your brother draws well, that's just your word, which can't be taken as fact. You're just a child and don't know good from bad in arrays. How about this, show me an array your brother has drawn. If it's really not bad, I'll agree to do business with you."

Mo Hua didn't actually have a brother, nor an array drawn by one.

He had his own drawn arrays in his storage bag, but those were from his sect lessons, breaking down basic array patterns or their combinations, slightly different from complete arrays.

A discerning eye would see right through if he handed them out.

After a moment's thought, Mo Hua brightened, "I didn't bring any of my brother's arrays, but he once taught me a bit. I'll draw for you, and you'll see if my brother's arrays are good."

"You can draw arrays?"

The manager was taken aback, thought for a moment, and then agreed.

He was curious about how well this child could draw, so he pulled out an array pattern from under the counter, handed over some ink, paper, and a brush to Mo Hua.

The pattern was titled "Blazing Fire Array," a complete array containing three patterns, taught at none of his sect's lessons—a challenge beyond a mere beginner's level.

Real arrays contain at least three interconnected patterns, like the Blazing Fire Array in front of him.

Mo Hua glanced at the manager and declared confidently, "This is too difficult. If I could draw it, I'd be earning spirit stones by drawing arrays myself; why would I need my brother?"

The manager slapped his forehead, having forgotten; a child his age couldn't possibly draw a complete array. It was too much to expect, and it was also because he had never dealt with children in the shop before that he had overlooked this.

The manager then pointed to a small part of the array pattern in the upper left corner, "If you can draw this part of the pattern, I'll agree to your request and have your brother draw arrays for us."

Mo Hua looked at the upper left corner, quietly relieved. It was a basic fire elemental pattern from his sect, with some detailed modifications and connections still within his grasp.

Mo Hua picked up the brush, dipped it in ink, and began sketching the pattern. Moments later, the pattern was completed.

The manager nodded slightly as Mo Hua drew. His handling of the brush was skilled and fluid, not tense at all, clearly well-founded. The pattern he drew was up to standard, without any mistakes. If not for family teaching, his brother must have taught him well.

The manager leaned more toward the latter, considering Mo Hua's simple but neat attire, clearly not from a wealthy family, whereas a cultivator from a family with array knowledge would surely not be so destitute.

Looking again at the pattern Mo Hua had drawn, the manager was quite satisfied, "Ten spirit stones for the deposit, and I'll give you the necessary array patterns and materials."

"Ten stones!"

Mo Hua was stunned.

He had only three spirit stones on him; he had earned twelve by copying array assignments for his fellow disciples, spent ten on a Fire-Resisting Hairpin, saved one by scrimping and saving, and then... that was all, his entire assets.

He'd have to wait until the day of the array coursework assessment to earn that many spirit stones by drawing arrays for his peers.

Who knew how long that would take!

Seeing Mo Hua's expression, the manager realized the boy didn't have the spirit stones but said nothing; it was normal for a child not to have so many.

Cultivation life was tough, and those in managerial positions often found themselves short of money, let alone a poor independent cultivator like Mo Hua.

The manager kindly reminded, "Without spirit stones for the deposit, you can't take this job."

Seeing Mo Hua seem a bit disheartened, he couldn't help but add, "I'll keep this order for your brother. When you have the spirit stones, come and take it."

Mo Hua nodded earnestly, "Okay, I'll go and... ask my brother for the spirit stones, then come back to take the order!"

The manager waved his hand, "Go play for now, it's still early. I'm going to close my eyes and rest a bit..." With that, he slowly closed his eyes and dozed off.

Mo Hua left the shop, squatting on the steps, cupping his cheeks, puzzled.

"Seven spirit stones..."

Mo Hua thought about earning spirit stones by drawing arrays, but to draw arrays and earn stones, he first needed stones; without stones, he couldn't draw arrays to earn stones...

Mo Hua's head spun.

Ask his parents?

Mo Hua shook his head; the family needed spirit stones for living expenses. That morning, he had heard his parents talking about Uncle Chu from the hunting team who had broken his arm and needed to borrow spirit stones for recovery, plus Mo Hua's sect fees for the next term. It seemed unlikely the family had any spare spirit stones.

Borrow from someone?

Mo Hua's friends were even poorer than he was; none had spirit stones to lend him.

As Mo Hua pondered deeply, he suddenly heard someone exclaim loudly:

"Mo Hua, you're actually here!"

Mo Hua looked up to see a richly dressed, chubby young master, surrounded by servants, staring at him angrily.