

CULTIVATION IS CREATION

Chapter 1: Death and Rebirth

You know what's funny? Death wasn't anything like I expected. No tunnel of light, no past memories flashing before my eyes, no choir of angels—just the abrupt sensation of my face meeting concrete at terminal velocity after tripping on my own shoelaces.

Yeah, I know. A pathetic way to go.

I'd always imagined my death would be more... dignified. Maybe heroically saving someone from a burning building, or peacefully passing away in my sleep after living a full life. Instead, I died because I couldn't be bothered to tie my shoes properly while rushing to my morning classes. The last thing I heard was the screech of brakes and someone yelling "Oh shit!" before everything went black.

Then came the void.

I floated in absolute nothingness for what felt like both an eternity and a mere instant. No sight, no sound, no sensation—just the awareness of my own consciousness suspended in infinite darkness. It was peaceful in a terrifying sort of way, like being wrapped in a blanket of existential horror.

"Well," I remember thinking, "this is anticlimactic."

But then something changed. A gentle tugging sensation, as if someone had tied a string to my soul and decided to go fishing. The void began to spin, or maybe I was the one spinning—it's hard to tell when you're just a disembodied consciousness. The peaceful horror transformed into what I can only describe as cosmic vertigo.

And then, without warning or fanfare, I was breathing again.

The first breath felt like inhaling fire. My lungs expanded painfully, and my entire body tingled as if I'd been hit by lightning. My face was pressed against something gritty and warm—dirt? I could feel it against my cheeks, taste it on my lips. For a moment, I thought I was back at the scene of my accident, face-down on the sidewalk.

But the air smelled different. Wrong. Or maybe right, just... not like anything I'd ever smelled before. Clean, with hints of unfamiliar flowers and herbs.

"Young man!" a concerned voice called out. "Young Ke Yin!"

Hands gripped my shoulders, gently turning me over. I opened my eyes and found myself staring up at... an impossibly blue sky? What happened to the concrete buildings? The traffic lights? The urban sprawl?

An elderly man with a long white beard leaned over me with a worried look on his face. He wore elaborate red robes and a jade-topped staff lay on the ground beside him. Behind him, I could make out two younger men in simpler robes, hovering anxiously.

"The fever—" one of them started.

"Has broken," the old man interrupted, pressing a hand to my forehead. "His spiritual pathways have stabilized. It seems the emergency technique worked, though not quite as expected."

I tried to sit up, and the old man helped me. That's when I noticed my hands—which weren't my hands at all. They were smaller, the fingers longer and more elegant than my old stubby digits. The skin was paler too, with a strange, almost luminous quality to it.

"I..." My voice came out different—younger, smoother. "What happened?"

What. The. Hell.

The words emerged in a language that wasn't English, but which I somehow understood perfectly.

The old man—Master Wei, a name that suddenly appeared in my mind—helped me to my feet.

"You collapsed with fever during our journey," he explained. "I feared we might lose you, but your spirit proved stronger than expected."

Yeah, about that...

My brain—or whatever brain I was currently borrowing—short-circuited.

You know that feeling when you wake up in a strange place and for a split second can't remember where you are? Yeah, multiply that by about a thousand. Different body, different language, and maybe even a different world.

I was either having the mother of all out-of-body experiences, or the universe had a seriously twisted sense of humor.

Okay, Kane, I told myself, trying to stay calm. Let's assess the situation.

One: I died. That much was certain unless this was some extremely vivid hallucination brought on by massive head trauma.

Two: I was now apparently inhabiting someone else's body.

Three: I was surrounded by people who looked like they'd stepped straight out of a wuxia drama.

Memories that weren't mine began filtering in, like water seeping through cracks in a dam.

This body belonged to—had belonged to?—a young man named Ke Yin, the son of a tailor in a small town called Floating Reed Village. He had been chosen by the visiting Immortal Masters to join their sect as an Outer Disciple, a rare honor that came once every few decades.

Master Wei, one of the sect's talent scouts, had tested hundreds of young people in the region before selecting young Ke Yin for his exceptional spiritual sensitivity. The two men behind us were his disciples, responsible for carrying supplies and protecting us on the journey to the sect.

But the original Ke Yin had been pushing himself too hard on the journey, hiding a burning fever that had finally overwhelmed him. Master Wei had attempted an emergency spiritual technique to save his life, but instead of preserving Ke Yin's failing body, the technique had inadvertently created a perfect conduit for my wandering consciousness to slip in just as the original soul departed.

Great. Not only was I a body-snatcher, but I was also apparently headed to some kind of mystical kungfu school. If this was the afterlife's idea of a joke, I wasn't laughing.

"We should reach the outer gates of the Azure Peak Sect by nightfall," Master Wei announced, interrupting my existential crisis. "Young Ke Yin, I trust you remember the basic courtesies we discussed?"

More borrowed memories bubbled up. Bow three times when meeting senior disciples. Address all inner disciples as 'Senior Brother' or 'Senior Sister.' Never look directly at the Elders unless given permission to speak. Keep your eyes down and your mouth shut unless spoken to.

"Yes, Master Wei," I replied automatically, grateful for the dead boy's memories. The last thing I needed was to offend someone in a world where people could apparently perform "spiritual techniques."

We walked in silence for several hours, giving me time to sort through the jumble of memories and information in my head. The original Ke Yin had been seventeen, a few years younger than I had been when I died. He'd lived a

relatively peaceful life helping at his father's shop, until Master Wei had visited their town and tested all the young people for some kind of spiritual potential.

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The test had involved holding a mysterious jade pendant and circulating one's breath in a specific pattern. Most of the teenagers had failed to produce any reaction, but when young Ke Yin had tried, the pendant had glowed with a soft blue light. That glow had sealed his fate—and now, apparently, mine as well.

The landscape gradually changed as we walked, the gentle hills giving way to increasingly steep terrain. In the distance, I could see mountains rising into the clouds, their peaks shrouded in mist. The air grew noticeably thinner, and I found myself having to take deeper breaths.

"The sacred peaks of our sect," Master Wei said, noticing my attention. "What you see is merely the mortal face of Azure Peak. Its true glory lies in the higher realms, hidden from mundane eyes."

I nodded, trying to look appropriately awed while internally wondering what the hell that meant. Higher realms? Mundane eyes? Every answer I got only raised more questions.

The sun was indeed setting by the time we reached what Master Wei had called the outer gates. To call them gates seemed like an understatement—they were more like walls, stretching up at least fifty feet and carved directly into the mountain face. The stone was a peculiar shade of blue-gray, and strange symbols had been carved into its surface in intricate patterns.

Two figures stood guard, wearing robes similar to Master Wei's but less elaborate. They straightened as we approached, offering respectful bows to the old master.

"Master Wei returns," one of them intoned formally. "We trust your search was fruitful?"

"Indeed," Master Wei replied. "One suitable candidate, showing promise in the Azure Path."

The guards nodded and made some kind of gesture with their hands. The massive gates began to swing open silently, despite their apparent weight. I tried not to gawk too obviously. Either these people had some incredibly well-oiled hinges, or something decidedly non-mechanical was at work here.

Beyond the gates lay a sprawling complex of buildings that seemed to defy gravity, perched on impossible cliffs and connected by delicate-looking bridges that swayed in the wind. Everything was built in that same distinctive blue-gray stone, with swooping roofs and delicate spires that pierced the clouds above.

"Welcome," Master Wei said, "to the Azure Peak Sect, your new home."

Home. The word hit me like a physical blow. Everything I'd been trying not to think about—my death, my family, my friends, my entire world—came crashing back. They would find my broken body on the university steps, call my parents, hold a funeral. Would they cry? Would they miss me? Did time even flow the same way between worlds?

"Young Ke Yin?" Master Wei's voice snapped me back to reality. "Are you unwell?"

I realized I had stopped walking, my borrowed body trembling slightly. "I... it's just overwhelming," I managed to say, which wasn't exactly a lie.

The old master's expression softened slightly. "It is natural to feel thus when first beholding the sacred peaks. Many young disciples find themselves overcome. Take a moment to compose yourself, then we shall proceed to the Outer Disciples' quarter for your registration and assignment."

I took a deep breath, forcing down the panic and grief that threatened to overwhelm me. I could have my existential crisis later, preferably in private. Right now, I needed to focus on survival. I was in a strange world with strange rules, and something told me that showing weakness here would be a very bad idea.

We crossed one of those seemingly fragile bridges, which thankfully proved more stable than it looked. The view was simultaneously breathtaking and terrifying—clouds swirled below us, and the wind carried whispers that seemed almost like voices. Every now and then, I caught glimpses of figures moving through the air in the distance, as if gravity was merely a suggestion rather than a law.

The Outer Disciples' quarter turned out to be a cluster of simple but elegant buildings near the base of one of the smaller peaks. Young men and women in plain gray robes hurried about their business, some carrying books or strange implements I couldn't identify. They all had the same careful way of moving, as if constantly aware of some invisible protocol.

Master Wei led me to a building marked with the character for "Registration" while his two disciples waited outside. Inside, an elderly woman sat at a desk covered in scrolls and what looked like jade tablets. She didn't look up as we entered.

"Name?" she asked in a bored tone.

"Ke Yin of Floating Reed Village," Master Wei answered for me. "Showing affinity for the Azure Path, recommended for general studies until his aptitude becomes clear."

The woman finally looked up, her eyes sharp despite her apparent age. She studied me for a long moment, then nodded and began writing on one of the scrolls with practiced efficiency.

"Dormitory Three, Cell Twelve," she said, handing me a jade tablet similar to the ones on her desk. "This is your identification token. Do not lose it. Your sect robes and basic cultivation materials will be provided by the quartermaster. Morning assembly is at dawn in the Outer Disciples' Square. Do not be late."

I accepted the tablet, noting how it felt warm to the touch despite being made of stone. More memories from the original Ke Yin filtered in—being late to morning assembly was apparently a serious offense, punishable by physical discipline and loss of privileges.

"I will leave you here," Master Wei said. "From this point forward, you must walk your own path. Remember what we discussed during our journey—maintain your dignity as a disciple of Azure Peak, but never let pride blind you to your own limitations. Many promising disciples have fallen because they forgot they were mere saplings reaching for the sun."

I bowed, remembering the proper form from the original Ke Yin's memories. "Thank you for your guidance, Master Wei."

The old master nodded once, then turned and left without another word. Just like that, I was alone in a strange world, about to begin a life I knew nothing about.

The quartermaster turned out to be a gruff man with impressive burn scars on his arms. He took one look at my identification tablet and began pulling items from various shelves: three sets of gray robes, a pair of sturdy boots, basic writing materials, and several objects I didn't recognize. Everything went into a simple cloth bag which he thrust into my arms.

"Basic cultivation materials are provided for the first month only," he growled. "After that, you'll need to earn contribution points to replace or upgrade them. Don't waste them."

I nodded, adding "figure out what contribution points are" to my mental list of urgent tasks. The bag was surprisingly heavy as I made my way to Dormitory Three, following directions provided by a slightly more helpful outer disciple.

Cell Twelve turned out to be a small but clean room with a narrow bed, a desk, and a shelf for personal belongings. A window overlooked one of the many courtyards, and I could see other new disciples moving into their own cells, some accompanied by family members who had apparently made the journey to see them off.

I had no such farewell party, and for that I was grateful. I wasn't sure I could handle watching someone else's parents say goodbye to someone who wasn't really their son anymore.

Sitting on the narrow bed, I finally allowed myself to really process everything that had happened. I had died. I had somehow possessed the body of another person who had also died. I was now in what appeared to be some kind of magical martial arts sect in a world that operated on completely different rules from the one I'd known.

"Okay," I whispered to myself, "okay. You can handle this. Just... take it one step at a time."

Having read my fair share of cultivation novels back on Earth, I knew better than to make assumptions. Every story seemed to have its own take on what cultivation actually meant.

In some, it was all about breathing techniques and meditation. In others, practitioners had to absorb natural energy or refine special pills. There were even ones where cultivators had to eat demons or make deals with ancient spirits. I couldn't assume anything about how it worked here.

Step one: Don't draw attention to myself until I figure out how things work here. Step two: Learn everything I can about this world and this sect. Step three: Figure out what "cultivation" actually means in this world and how not to fall behind. Step four... well, I'd figure that out when I got there.

A bell rang somewhere in the distance, its deep tone resonating through the mountain. Through the window, I could see disciples beginning to gather in what I assumed was the Outer Disciples' Square. Time for whatever passed for orientation in this place.

I changed into one of the sect robes, carefully following the folding patterns shown in the original Ke Yin's memories. The fabric was surprisingly comfortable, and something about its texture felt almost alive, as if it was responding to my body heat.

"Right," I muttered, straightening the robes one final time. "Let's go learn how to be an immortal cultivator. How hard can it be?"

As I stepped out of my cell, I couldn't shake the feeling that I was about to find out exactly how hard it could be. But then, I was already dead—what was the worst that could happen?

In retrospect, that was probably not the best question to ask in a world where apparently anything was possible.

The sun was setting behind the sacred peaks of Azure Peak Sect, casting long shadows across the courtyards. In those shadows, I could have sworn I saw things moving that didn't match any laws of physics I knew. Above, the clouds continued their eternal dance around the mountain peaks, and somewhere in the distance, someone was playing a melody on what sounded like a flute, its notes carrying impossible distances on the wind.

Welcome to your new life, Kane. Try not to die again.