

CULTIVATION IS CREATION

Chapter 11: Testing Times

Sitting in the Outer Disciples' courtyard waiting for a cultivation evaluation that might accidentally trigger interdimensional travel was stressful. At least with regular exams, the worst that can happen is failing. Here? The consequences ranged from "lifetime spiritual beast stable duty" to "oops, I accidentally fell into another reality where everything wants to kill me."

"You look like you're planning your own funeral," Wei Lin commented, sprawled on the stone steps beside me. "Relax! You've made it to Qi Condensation Second Realm, your energy control is weirdly perfect, and you've got that mysterious talent thing going for you. What could go wrong?"

"Please don't tempt fate," I muttered, watching more disciples gather for the evaluation. "Every time someone says that, the heavens take it as a personal challenge."

Status Update:

Soul Essence: 280/300 (Stable... for now)

Spiritual Essence: 246/246 (Ready for testing)

Physical Essence: 215/215 (Probably not enough)

Chance of Dimensional Incident: 8% (and rising with anxiety)

"He's right though," Lin Mei added from my other side. She was methodically sorting spiritual herbs, because apparently even impending doom couldn't stop her from being productive. "You've been advancing faster than anyone expected. Even Senior Sister Chen mentioned your progress, and she never compliments anyone."

"That's because compliments might encourage us to think we're actually good at something," I said, remembering yesterday's particularly brutal herb garden session. "Can't have that in a proper cultivation sect."

Wei Lin snorted. "Says the guy who went from village recruit to Second Realm in record time. Some of us had to work for our breakthrough, you know."

"Oh yes, all that hard work spending your family's money on premium cultivation resources. However do you manage?"

"It's a terrible burden," he agreed solemnly. "Speaking of which, sure you don't want some last-minute enhancement pills? Only slightly expired!"

Lin Mei rolled her eyes at our familiar exchange. "Boys and their cultivation techniques. You know what really matters? Consistent progress. Like these Dawn Lotus seedlings - you can't rush their growth without ruining the spiritual essence concentration."

She held up one of her sorted herbs, its petals giving off a soft golden glow. "See how the energy patterns flow? Smooth, stable, no forced breakthroughs or artificial enhancements. That's real cultivation."

"Speaking of energy patterns," Wei Lin said, suddenly more serious, "anyone hear about the new evaluation format? Apparently they've brought in special testing equipment from the inner sect."

That got my attention. "What kind of equipment?"

"Resonance crystals," he replied, dropping his merchant's son act entirely.

"Very expensive, very precise. They can measure not just the quantity of spiritual energy but its quality. Refinement level, stability, even trace signs of what methods were used to cultivate it."

More disciples were arriving now, filling the courtyard with nervous chatter and last-minute cultivation attempts. I recognized some faces from the herb gardens, others from combat training sessions. Everyone looked various shades of terrified, which was actually kind of reassuring. At least I wasn't the only one having an existential crisis.

"Look at them all trying to cram," Wei Lin said with the smugness of someone who'd had access to advanced techniques since birth. "As if a few hours of meditation will make up for months of proper cultivation."

"Not everyone has a family merchant empire backing them," Lin Mei pointed out. "Some of us had to earn every spiritual herb and cultivation manual."

"That's what makes it so impressive!" He grinned at our confused looks.

"Think about it - you two started with nothing but basic sect resources, and

now you're both in the top tier of outer disciples. Meanwhile, half these people had special techniques and premium resources from the start, and they're still struggling with basic energy circulation."

"Was that... actually encouraging?" I asked Lin Mei.

"I think he's trying a new sales technique," she stage-whispered back. "Build up our confidence so we're more likely to buy his overpriced cultivation supplies."

"I am wounded by your accusations! Also, since you mentioned it, I do have some excellent evaluation-day specials..."

A bell rang somewhere in the distance, its deep tone resonating with spiritual energy. The courtyard immediately fell silent.

The genuine version of this novel can be found on another site. Support the author by reading it there.

"All outer disciples, prepare for evaluation," Senior Sister Liu's voice carried across the gathering. "You will be tested in three areas: energy capacity and refinement, technique proficiency, and combat ability. Those who fail to meet the new standards will be... reassigned."

She didn't need to elaborate on what that meant. We'd all seen the former disciples now tending to the sect's more unpleasant maintenance duties.

"Disciples will be called in groups of ten," she continued. "First group: Wei Lin, Ming Yue, Ke Yin..."

"Of course we're in the first group," I muttered as we stood. "Wouldn't want to give us time to panic properly."

"Look on the bright side," Wei Lin said as we followed Senior Sister Liu toward the testing grounds. "At least we'll get it over with quickly!"

"Unless we fail spectacularly and spend the rest of our lives cleaning spiritual beast stables."

The testing grounds turned out to be one of the sect's larger training halls, now modified with arrays of crystals and formation circles that made my spiritual senses tingle uncomfortably. Inner sect disciples stood at various stations, their expressions ranging from bored to actively hoping we'd fail.

"First test," Senior Sister Liu announced, "spiritual energy capacity and refinement. Step into the testing formation when called. The resonance crystals will measure your progress. Try not to embarrass yourselves."

Very encouraging.

The first few disciples' tests went about as expected. Most showed decent energy capacity for Qi Condensation First or Second Realm, though their refinement levels varied widely. Wei Lin, naturally, scored well above average - the benefits of expensive resources showing in his energy quality.

"Next: Ke Yin."

Here we go. Try not to accidentally fall into another dimension. Randomly entering a comatose state for a few seconds would probably count as an automatic failure.

I stepped into the formation circle, feeling the resonance crystals activate around me. They hummed with analytical energy, probing my spiritual essence like particularly nosy doctors.

"Relax," Azure advised as the crystals began their scan. "The System's modifications should prevent any unusual energy signatures from being detected. Just maintain steady cultivation and... oh, that's interesting."

The crystals suddenly flared with brilliant blue light, their resonance reaching a pitch that made several inner disciples wince. I felt my spiritual energy responding, flowing through the carefully optimized circulation paths of my inner world.

"Energy capacity," one of the testing disciples announced, consulting a jade tablet, "246 units. Refinement level... unprecedented for current cultivation stage. Energy stability exceeding normal parameters."

The other inner disciples gathered around, muttering among themselves as they examined the readings. Even Senior Sister Liu looked mildly surprised.

"Internal circulation patterns show systematic optimization," another tester reported. "Nearly perfect efficiency ratings. This is... unusual for an outer disciple."

I tried to look appropriately humble while internally screaming at Azure to make sure nothing weird showed up in the readings. The last thing I needed was them detecting the experimental soul cultivation method.

"Cultivation foundation is remarkably stable," the first tester continued. "Though there are some anomalies in the energy signature..."

Warning: Partial Method Detection

Implementing Advanced Camouflage

Recommend reducing power output by 15%

I followed Azure's guidance, carefully moderating my spiritual energy as the crystals continued their analysis. The resonance gradually settled into a more normal range, though I could tell the testers were still puzzled by whatever they'd detected.

"Final readings confirmed," Senior Sister Liu announced after what felt like hours but was probably only minutes. "Energy capacity and refinement test: Passed with distinction. You may step out of the formation."

I tried not to look too relieved as I rejoined the other disciples. Wei Lin was practically vibrating with curiosity, but Lin Mei's expression was more calculating. She'd noticed something in the test results, something that didn't quite add up...

"How did a village recruit achieve that level of energy refinement?" I heard one of the inner disciples whisper. "Even with natural talent, the optimization patterns are too perfect..."

"Advanced family techniques," another suggested. "Has to be. No one develops that kind of systematic control naturally."

Well, they weren't wrong about the systematic part. Just wrong about where it came from.

The rest of the first group's tests passed in a blur of crystal resonance and evaluator comments. By the end, it was clear that this year's standards were indeed much higher than usual. Several disciples who might have passed easily before were now marked for "further evaluation" - sect code for "start practicing your spiritual beast handling skills."

"Preliminary results for energy capacity and refinement testing," Senior Sister Liu announced to the gathering. "Top performers, in order of overall scoring: Song Xiang, Wei Lin, Ke Yin, Lin Mei..."

I wished I could feel more proud of placing third, but all I could think about was how much attention this would bring. The last thing I needed was people looking too closely at my cultivation methods.

"Initial testing complete," Senior Sister Liu continued after reading the full rankings. "Prepare yourselves for the combat evaluation portion. Inner Disciple Zhou will be overseeing the matches personally."

Oh.

Oh no.

Remember how I said things could always get worse? Yeah, this would be why.

Zhou Ming stepped into the training hall, his customary smirk somehow even more punchable than usual. His gaze swept over the gathered disciples before settling on me with predatory interest.

"Interesting test results," he said, voice carrying easily in the sudden silence. "Let's see if your combat abilities match your energy refinement, shall we?"

Wei Lin patted my shoulder sympathetically. "Well, it was nice knowing you. Don't worry, I'll make sure they write something nice on your memorial tablet. 'Here lies Ke Yin, who really should have bought those premium defensive techniques when he had the chance.'"

"Still focusing on basics," I replied automatically, watching Zhou test the edge of his practice sword with a thoughtful expression that promised nothing but pain in my immediate future.

"Your dedication to fundamentals is admirable," Lin Mei said dryly. "Though perhaps now might be a good time to reconsider that position? I hear the spiritual beast stables are lovely this time of year..."

"Too late for that," I sighed as Zhou began organizing the combat matches. "At this point, I can only hope he doesn't enjoy himself too much while beating me into the ground."

"Oh, he'll definitely enjoy himself," Wei Lin assured me. "The question is whether you'll still be conscious enough to notice."

Some friends I had.

At least if I did accidentally fall into another dimension during the combat evaluation, it would probably be less painful than whatever Zhou had planned.

