

CULTIVATION IS CREATION

Chapter 12: The Bet

You know what's worse than facing an opponent who clearly wants to pummel you into the ground? Facing that opponent while a helpful AI system keeps calculating your chances of survival in real-time.

"Probability of defeat: 92.4%," Azure chimed in as Zhou Ming stretched lazily, his practice sword glinting with an eagerness that seemed excessive for training equipment. "Though I suppose 'defeat' is better than 'total annihilation', which was my initial calculation!"

"Not helping," I muttered, trying to focus on my own warm-up exercises. The combat evaluation area had been cleared, with other disciples forming an expectant circle around the edges. I spotted Wei Lin actually taking bets, because of course he was. The odds probably weren't in my favor.

"First match," Senior Sister Liu announced, "Zhou Ming versus Ke Yin. Standard evaluation rules apply - no lethal techniques, no permanent

damage." She paused, giving Zhou a pointed look. "That means no 'accidentally' crippling your opponent's cultivation base."

Zhou's innocent expression wouldn't have fooled a blind cultivator. "I would never dream of it, Senior Sister. This is merely a friendly evaluation match."

Right. And spiritual beasts were just misunderstood puppies.

"Remember," Liu continued, "as Ke Yin is in Qi Condensation Second Realm, this will be primarily a test of martial arts prowess. Spiritual battle techniques are restricted until Third Realm for good reason - they drain too much qi for lower realm disciples to use effectively in combat."

That was both good and bad news. Good because it meant Zhou couldn't use his more devastating spiritual techniques. Bad because he was still physically stronger, faster, and had probably forgotten more martial arts than I'd learned so far.

"Begin!" Senior Sister Liu stepped back, and Zhou immediately launched into motion.

Here's the thing about martial arts in cultivation sects - they're nothing like the movies. No fancy flips or dramatic poses. It's all about efficiency, about using qi-enhanced strength and speed to hit hard and fast. Zhou's first strike came in low and fast, a simple punch aimed at my solar plexus that would have dropped me if it landed.

I managed to deflect it, barely, using one of the basic defensive forms we'd learned in training. The impact still sent vibrations up my arm. Even without spiritual techniques, qi-enhanced strength made every blow potentially devastating.

"Decent reaction," Zhou commented, flowing into a combination of strikes that forced me to backpedal. "But you're too defensive. An evaluation isn't just about surviving."

He had a point, annoyingly enough. Pure defense wouldn't be enough to pass, no matter how well executed. But going offensive against someone with his experience seemed like a fast way to get thoroughly thrashed.

"Your stance is too rigid," Azure observed as I barely avoided a kick that would have taken my head off. "Try implementing fluidity protocol beta-seven..."

"Less analyzing, more helping!" I ducked under another strike, feeling it brush my hair. Zhou was playing with me, testing my defenses while probably planning something much more painful.

The next exchange was faster, a blur of strikes and blocks that showed exactly why Zhou was considered one of the inner sect's rising stars. I managed to hold my own, mostly through desperate dodging and Azure's split-second warnings, but we both knew he was just warming up.

"Not completely hopeless," Zhou said, launching a combination that forced me to actually counterattack or get hit. "But still too cautious. Show me what that perfect energy control can really do!"

He punctuated the taunt with a strike that broke through my guard, landing solidly on my ribs. Even with qi reinforcement, it hurt like hell. I stumbled back, gasping, as the watching disciples made appreciative noises.

"Rib integrity at 82%," Azure reported helpfully. "Recommended action: don't do that again."

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Thanks. Super useful.

But the hit did something else - it made me angry. Not the blind rage kind of angry, but the cold, calculating kind that made me stop thinking about how outmatched I was and start actually analyzing the fight.

Zhou was better than me in every way, true. But he was also showing off for the audience, making each exchange slightly more elaborate than necessary. There was a pattern to it, a rhythm I could almost...

"Got it," Azure said, apparently following my thoughts. "Implementing predictive movement analysis. His next combination will leave a 0.3-second opening on the left side."

I didn't have time to question it. Zhou came in with another flowing combination, each strike perfectly placed to force specific defensive responses. But this time, I was ready. As he committed to a particularly showy kick, I saw the brief opening Azure had predicted.

My counterattack wasn't fancy. Just a simple, qi-enhanced straight punch aimed at his exposed side. But it was perfectly timed, catching him just as his momentum was committed to the kick.

Zhou's eyes widened slightly as he was forced to awkwardly twist away from the strike. He didn't quite dodge it completely - my fist grazed his ribs, earning surprised murmurs from the watching disciples.

"Interesting," he said, his smile gaining an edge that promised retribution. "So you can attack after all."

The next minute was pure survival mode. Zhou stopped playing around and showed exactly why he was considered a combat prodigy. His strikes came faster, harder, each one designed to exploit the openings left by defending against the previous attack. I blocked what I could, dodged what I couldn't, and tried not to think about how many bruises I'd have tomorrow.

"Current damage assessment," Azure reported as another hit slipped through my guard, "suggests you might want to consider that stable-cleaning career after all."

A sweep took my legs out from under me, and I barely managed to roll away from the follow-up strike that would have ended the match. My breath came in ragged gasps, every movement sending new waves of pain through various impacted body parts.

"Better than expected," Zhou admitted, circling as I struggled back to my feet. "But still not enough. Show me something worth remembering, or this ends now."

He was right. I was running out of energy and options. Traditional martial arts clearly weren't going to cut it - Zhou had probably mastered these forms before I even started cultivation.

"Any bright ideas?" I asked Azure mentally, ducking another combination that felt like trying to block a hurricane.

"Several! Though most involve dimensional travel, which might be considered cheating. However, your energy circulation is still oddly perfect despite the beating. Perhaps we could use that..."

That sparked something - a crazy idea that probably wouldn't work but was better than just waiting to get knocked out.

Normal qi enhancement for martial arts was pretty straightforward - you circulated energy through your body to strengthen muscles, reinforce bones, and speed up movements. Most disciples our level could maintain a decent enhancement for short bursts, but sustained usage would drain too much qi to be practical.

But my energy circulation wasn't normal, thanks to Azure's optimization algorithms. What if instead of the standard enhancement pattern...

"Oh!" Azure caught on immediately. "Yes, that could work! Implementing modified circulation pattern now. Try not to explode!"

The next time Zhou attacked, I did something different. Instead of the normal qi enhancement, I let Azure direct my energy through the optimized paths he'd developed. It was like switching from a garden hose to a precision irrigation system - same amount of water, but used far more efficiently.

The result wasn't dramatically visible like spiritual battle techniques would be. No glowing auras or dramatic energy releases. Just a sudden, subtle increase in speed and precision that let me not only block Zhou's next combination but counter with one of my own.

His eyes narrowed as he was forced to actually put effort into defending. "Energy manipulation of this level during combat? At Second Realm? Interesting..."

The next exchange was almost even, my optimized enhancement letting me match his superior skill for a brief moment. I even managed to land another glancing blow, though the effort left me gasping.

It couldn't last, of course. Even with perfect circulation, I was burning through qi faster than was sustainable at Second Realm. But it let me show enough skill to prove I wasn't completely hopeless.

Zhou ended it with a blindingly fast combination that broke through my fading defense. The final hit sent me sprawling, my vision going fuzzy around the edges as I tried to remember how breathing worked.

"Match concluded," Senior Sister Liu announced. "Zhou Ming wins, obviously. However..." She consulted her jade tablet. "Ke Yin's performance exceeded minimum requirements for combat evaluation. Especially considering the difference in experience levels."

I managed to sit up, which felt like a significant accomplishment given how many parts of me were protesting movement of any kind.

"Status report?" I asked Azure mentally.

"Good news - nothing's broken! Bad news - everything wishes it was. Also, your qi reserves are almost completely drained, and I'm detecting at least seven distinct bruise formations. On the bright side, we only had a 2% chance of dimensional instability during that last enhancement sequence!"

Wei Lin and Lin Mei helped me to my feet, supporting me as we moved away from the combat area.

"That," Wei Lin announced, "was either incredibly brave or incredibly stupid. I'm still deciding which, but either way, I made a fortune betting on you lasting more than two minutes!"

Of course he did.