

CULTIVATION IS CREATION

Chapter 13: Everyone Else's Turn to Suffer

There's something uniquely satisfying about watching other people go through the same traumatic experience you just survived. Maybe that makes me a terrible person, but hey - I earned these bruises, I might as well enjoy the show.

"Next match," Senior Sister Liu announced as Wei Lin stepped into the combat area. "Try to last longer than five seconds."

"Senior Sister, you wound me!" Wei Lin clutched his chest dramatically. "I'll have you know I've invested heavily in premium defensive techniques specifically for this evaluation."

Zhou Ming's smile hadn't lost any of its predatory edge. "Wonderful. Show me what your family's money bought you."

I settled carefully against a pillar, trying to find a position that didn't aggravate any of my new collection of bruises. Lin Mei sat beside me, sorting what looked suspiciously like medicinal herbs.

"Is it wrong that I'm looking forward to this?" I asked, watching Wei Lin assume what he probably thought was an impressive combat stance.

"Only if it's wrong that I brought healing supplies specifically for the entertainment value," she replied, laying out various plants with practiced efficiency. "Also, you might want these soon. Your face is starting to swell."

"My face is fine- ow!" I touched my cheek and immediately regretted it. "Okay, maybe some healing wouldn't hurt."

"Begin!" Senior Sister Liu's command was immediately followed by Wei Lin demonstrating that, contrary to popular belief, throwing money at a problem sometimes actually works.

His movement technique was clearly expensive - the kind of refined martial art that takes generations of wealthy family members to develop. He flowed around Zhou's initial attacks like water, each dodge precise and economical.

"Impressive," Zhou commented, increasing his speed. "The Yang Family's Shadow Step technique? Must have cost a fortune."

Wei Lin twirled away from a kick that would have taken his head off. "Worth every spirit stone!" he called back cheerfully, somehow managing to speak clearly while avoiding a combination that had him wincing in sympathy.

"Though the maintenance fees are murder. Do you know how much they charge for technique refinement consultations?"

I had to admit, he was doing better than expected. Money might not buy skill, but watching him flow around Zhou's attacks like autumn leaves in the wind, it was clear it could buy some damn good defensive techniques.

"Your friend is surprisingly competent," Azure observed as Wei Lin continued his elaborate evasion dance. "Though my calculations suggest he's about to run out of room to dodge."

Sure enough, Zhou hadn't been attacking randomly. Each strike had been pushing Wei Lin back, cutting off escape routes with the patience of a master strategist. The realization dawned on Wei Lin's face the moment his heel touched the corner stones - his confident grin finally faltering as he understood the trap.

"Ah," he said, glancing at the walls boxing him in. "I don't suppose you'd be interested in discussing exclusive rights to some premium spiritual resources?"

Zhou's response was devastating. His arms became a blur of motion, strikes coming from every angle at once. Wei Lin's fancy footwork meant nothing when there was nowhere left to step. The Shadow Step technique that had served him so well crumbled, and in three brutal seconds, it was over.

"I demand a refund on that last technique scroll," Wei Lin, face-down on the training ground, groaned.

"Pass," Senior Sister Liu announced, consulting her tablet. "Though barely. Next time, consider investing in some actual offensive capabilities."

"But running away is so much safer!" Wei Lin protested as he limped over to join us. "Also, ow. Everything hurts. Lin Mei, please tell me those are premium healing herbs you're sorting."

"Basic sect supplies," she replied, tossing him a leaf. "Chew on that, it helps with bruising. And maybe next time spend less on dodging techniques and more on actual combat training?"

"You sound just like my father," Wei Lin sighed, but obediently chewed the herb. "Always going on about 'practical applications' and 'combat effectiveness' when I try to expense pure defensive arts."

The next few matches showed exactly why most disciples dreaded combat evaluations. Zhou was methodical in exposing every weakness, every gap in training. Some matches ended in seconds, others dragged on as he deliberately tested different aspects of their martial arts.

"Lin Mei," Senior Sister Liu called. "Your turn."

"Don't die," I offered helpfully as she stood. "I need someone to supply healing herbs."

"Your concern is touching," she replied dryly. "Try not to enjoy my impending humiliation too much."

But Lin Mei surprised everyone, including Zhou. Her movements weren't flashy like Wei Lin's expensive techniques or precisely optimized like my desperate survival attempt. Instead, she fought with the kind of efficient pragmatism you'd expect from someone who spent most of their time working with spiritual herbs.

"Interesting approach," Zhou commented as she blocked a strike with her forearm in a way that would definitely leave bruises but also let her counter effectively. "Very... practical."

"Some of us can't afford fancy techniques," she replied, flowing through a series of basic but well-executed forms. "We have to make basics work."

She lasted longer than most, earning appreciative murmurs from the watching disciples. Her style wasn't beautiful, but it was effective - until Zhou decided to stop playing around.

The match ended with Lin Mei on one knee, breathing hard but still conscious. "I think I prefer angry spiritual beasts," she muttered. "At least they don't enjoy it quite so much."

"Pass," Senior Sister Liu announced. "Good use of fundamental techniques. Though your guard on the left side needs work."

"Everyone's guard needs work against him," Lin Mei grumbled as she joined us, accepting a healing herb from her own collection. "He's not human."

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"Next match," Liu called. "Song Xiang."

The disciple who stepped forward made everyone sit up straighter. Even Zhou's perpetual smirk faltered slightly.

Song Xiang was... well, if you wrote a story about a cultivation prodigy, he'd be the main character. Tall, graceful, with the kind of classical good looks that made female disciples sigh dreamily. But it was his presence that really stood out - there was something about him that just felt significant.

"Oh right," Wei Lin whispered, "you were doing your weird spacing out act when he did his energy capacity test. Broke three resonance crystals. Three! Do you know how expensive those are?"

"The mysterious young master type?" I asked, watching Song Xiang bow formally to Zhou. "Let me guess - secretly from some great cultivation family, hiding his identity to temper himself among us mere mortals?"

"Close!" Wei Lin grinned. "He showed up three months ago with some tragic backstory about his sect being destroyed. Supposedly he was some elder's secret disciple, now seeking revenge or something appropriately dramatic. Senior Sister Chen actually smiled at him once."

"Impossible," Lin Mei cut in. "Senior Sister Chen doesn't smile. I saw her kick a spiritual puppy once."

"I'm telling you, it happened! And that's not even the most interesting part. They say he has some unique cultivation technique that-"

"Begin!"

What followed was... different from the previous matches. Song Xiang moved like water given form, each motion flowing seamlessly into the next. His martial arts weren't flashy like Wei Lin's expensive techniques or practical like Lin Mei's efficiency. They were simply perfect.

"His energy circulation," Azure commented, sounding almost excited. "It's... elegant. Like watching optimization algorithms dance."

Zhou actually had to put in visible effort as they exchanged strikes, neither gaining a clear advantage. Song Xiang matched him technique for technique, his movements carrying a hint of something greater held in check.

"Impressive," Zhou said after a particularly intense exchange. "Your foundation is exceptional. Traditional Flowing Cloud style?"

"Modified Heaven's Path forms," Song Xiang replied, his voice carrying that perfect mix of humility and confidence that made me instantly suspicious. "My master believed in adapting classical techniques to individual talents."

"Your master taught you well." Zhou's next combination would have ended any other match instantly. Song Xiang turned it aside like a leaf deflecting rain.

The watching disciples were absolutely silent, caught between awe and envy. Even Senior Sister Liu looked impressed, which I hadn't thought was physically possible.

"You know," Wei Lin mused, "if this were a story, he'd be the main character and we'd all be side characters in his grand cultivation journey."

Speak for yourself. I have my own mysterious powers to develop, thank you very much. Though, he had a point, annoyingly enough. Song Xiang looked like he should be on the cover of "Young Master's Monthly" or whatever cultivation prodigies read these days.

The match continued for several more minutes, Zhou gradually increasing the intensity until even Song Xiang started showing signs of strain. But unlike the rest of us who'd been thoroughly thrashed, he maintained his perfect form throughout.

"Enough," Zhou finally called, stepping back. "Well fought."

Song Xiang bowed again, not even breathing hard. "Thank you for the guidance, Senior Brother."

"Pass," Senior Sister Liu announced, somewhat unnecessarily. "Exceptional performance. Though I note you're still holding back considerably."

"My cultivation is still unstable," Song Xiang replied with practiced modesty. "I wouldn't want to risk disrupting the evaluation with... unnecessary displays."

Oh, he was good. That hint of hidden power, the carefully humble demeanor... it was like he'd studied "How to Be a Mysterious Young Master" and gotten perfect marks.

"Called it," Wei Lin whispered as Song Xiang returned to his place among the disciples. "Tragic backstory, secret techniques, perfect martial arts... he's definitely the protagonist of some cultivation drama we've accidentally wandered into."

"You're just jealous because his techniques look better than your expensive ones," Lin Mei pointed out.

"Of course I'm jealous! Do you know how much I spent on that Shadow Step technique? And he just casually mentions 'Modified Heaven's Path forms' like it's nothing. Heaven's Path! That's literally a legendary lost cultivation art!"

I watched Song Xiang carefully not preening under the admiring looks from other disciples. There was something about him that bothered me, beyond the too-perfect young master vibe.

"Azure? Any thoughts on our resident protagonist?"

"His energy patterns are fascinating! Very refined, definitely not standard cultivation methods. Though there's something odd about the resonance... like looking at a perfect reflection and realizing it's slightly off-center."

"Suspicious?" I asked mentally.

"Oh, definitely! But probably not in a 'secret evil cultivator' way. More like... imagine someone rebuilt a legendary cultivation technique from fragments, getting most of it right but missing some crucial underlying principle. The results look perfect, but the foundation has subtle flaws."

Interesting. Though I probably shouldn't judge, given my own rather unique cultivation situation.

The rest of the combat evaluations were almost anticlimactic after Song Xiang's performance. Zhou went back to efficiently dismantling everyone's defensive techniques, though he seemed slightly less enthusiastic about it.

"Final results," Senior Sister Liu announced once the last groaning disciple had been dragged away. "Out of thirty-two participants, twenty-seven pass, four require remedial training, and one..." She glanced at the unconscious disciple being treated for multiple impacts. "One should consider a different career path."

"Could be worse," Wei Lin commented, carefully prodding his various bruises. "Have you heard about last year's evaluation? Apparently Zhou was in a bad mood and sent half the outer disciples to the medical pavilion?"

"Don't remind me," Lin Mei sighed. "My sister spent weeks making healing salves for that mess. Speaking of which..." She started handing out more herbs. "Basic pain relief. Don't expect miracles."

I watched Song Xiang bow politely to Zhou again before leaving, a small crowd of admirers trailing in his wake. "Taking bets on his tragic backstory actually being tragic?"

"No bet," Wei Lin replied. "Though I heard a rumor that his sect wasn't really destroyed - they just didn't appreciate his heaven-defying talent and tried to suppress him, forcing him to seek his own path..."

"That does sound more appropriately dramatic," Lin Mei agreed. "Though I still think Senior Sister Chen smiling at him is the most unbelievable part."

"It happened! I have witnesses!"

As they argued about the statistical probability of Senior Sister Chen expressing positive emotions, I found myself wondering about Song Xiang's perfect but slightly flawed cultivation. Something about Azure's assessment nagged at me, like looking at a puzzle where one piece was rotated just wrong enough to notice.

Status Update:

Combat Evaluation: Survived

Bruise Collection: Expanding

Mysterious Young Master Alert: Active

Azure's Curiosity: Piqued

Need for Better Training: Critical (again)

Probability of Being in Someone Else's Cultivation Drama: Rising

"Stop worrying about the protagonist candidate," Azure advised. "We have our own mysterious powers to develop! Though possibly with fewer heavenly tribulations, if I can help it. Those seem statistically unfavorable to survival."

He had a point. Let Song Xiang have his perfect techniques and dramatic backstory. I had my own path to follow, even if it was considerably less photogenic and involved more technological assistance than heaven-defying talent.

Though I really needed to work on my martial arts, it would be useless in any world I travel to. Maybe Wei Lin had a discount on some less fancy but actually useful combat techniques...

"Already calculating optimal training protocols!" Azure announced cheerfully. "Though I should mention there's a small chance of dimensional instability during high-intensity practice sessions..."

Wonderful. Because regular martial arts training wasn't painful enough without the risk of accidentally falling into another reality.

"You know," Wei Lin mused as we finally left the training hall, "I could probably make a fortune selling 'Mysterious Young Master' cultivation supplies. Premium technique scrolls, dramatically torn robes, tragic backstory consultation services..."

Some things never changed. Though I had to admit, a dramatically torn robe might actually improve my cultivation image...

"No," Lin Mei said firmly, apparently reading my expression. "Stick to basics. Let the young masters worry about looking pretty while getting beat up."

She was right, of course. I had enough to worry about without trying to compete in the mysterious prodigy department. Though maybe just a small investment in Wei Lin's premium defensive techniques wouldn't hurt...