

CULTIVATION IS CREATION

Chapter 14: Higher Games

Elder Chen Yong sat in his customary place within the Celestial Peak's central chamber. The other elders - peak Stellar Realm cultivators whose very presence could shake mountains - were arranged in a loose circle, their attention focused on the array of light hovering in the chamber's center.

The array displayed scenes from the outer disciples' evaluation, spiritual energy reconstructing each moment in perfect detail. Chen Yong watched his fellow elders' reactions as much as the images themselves, noting every slight shift in expression, every minute fluctuation in spiritual pressure. Even after decades of service as an elder, he still found it amusing how these scenes played out, year after year.

"Interesting crop this year," Elder Sun remarked with his usual affected wisdom. At over a thousand years old, he loved playing the role of the ancient sage.

Chen Yong resisted the urge to roll his eyes. He'd seen enough "interesting crops" to last several lifetimes.

"The merchant's son has decent foundation," Elder Liu offered, gesturing at Wei Lin's Shadow Step technique.

Chen Yong nearly snorted. Decent foundation - as if throwing money at cultivation could substitute for true understanding. But he kept his expression neutral, letting the others continue their familiar dance.

"Too reliant on purchased techniques," Elder Wang predictably dismissed. "No true understanding of martial principles. Though I suppose he might develop adequately with proper guidance."

They discussed each disciple in turn. The Lin girl's practical efficiency earned some grudging approval, while the strange boy Ke Yin's unusually perfect energy control sparked brief debate before being dismissed as probably some forgotten family technique.

But it was Song Xiang's performance that truly captured their attention.

"Modified Heaven's Path forms," Elder Sun breathed, leaning forward as the array replayed the young man's combat evaluation. "Not quite pure lineage, but remarkably close. Watch his energy circulation during this sequence..."

The array zoomed in, spiritual energy highlighting the precise patterns of Song Xiang's qi flow as he matched Zhou Ming's techniques. Even in slow motion, the movements carried an inherent grace that spoke of profound understanding.

"His foundation is exceptional," Elder Wang admitted, which almost made Chen Yong laugh out loud. Wang had rejected enough disciples to populate a small sect, and here he was, practically salivating over this one's potential.

"Though there are subtle imperfections in the energy convergence points...", the elder continued.

"Imperfections that could be corrected with proper guidance," Elder Liu cut in smoothly. "His talent is obvious. The question is who will provide that guidance."

And there it was - the real reason for this gathering. Chen Yong hid a smile as centuries-old political alliances began shifting like desert sands.

"My cultivation path would suit his talents," Elder Sun offered casually. "The boy clearly has an affinity for classical techniques. Under my guidance..."

"Your path emphasizes stability over growth," Elder Wang interrupted. "His potential requires a more aggressive approach. My Ascending Thunder techniques..."

"Would burn out half his meridians within a month," Elder Liu snapped. "The boy needs refinement, not brute force advancement. My Gentle Flame Path..."

"Is about as gentle as a rampaging spiritual beast," Elder Sun muttered, just loud enough to be heard.

Song Xiang's talent was remarkable, true, but it was the political value of such a promising disciple that truly drove their enthusiasm.

As the debate grew more heated, Chen Yong settled deeper into his seat. At his age, he'd learned there was more value in watching and waiting than in joining every argument. Besides, he had a jar of spirit wine waiting in his

quarters that would be far better company than this gathering of squabbling immortals.

The array shifted again, showing Song Xiang's energy capacity test. The moment when three resonance crystals shattered under the pressure of his spiritual essence drew appreciative murmurs even on second viewing.

"Raw power like that needs proper tempering," Elder Wang insisted. "My techniques..."

"Would waste half that potential on flashy demonstrations," Elder Liu countered. "The boy clearly understands subtle manipulation. Look at how he limits his output during the combat evaluation - that kind of control requires..."

"A more experienced perspective than any of you can provide."

The new voice cut through the chamber like a blade of pure authority. Every elder straightened instinctively as Sect Master Yuan stepped out of the shadows, his presence making the very air grow heavy with spiritual pressure.

Chen Yong hadn't even sensed him enter, which was... concerning. The Sect Master's cultivation was so far beyond them that he could probably erase mountains without effort, but he usually maintained a careful limitation on his spiritual pressure out of courtesy.

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The fact that he was letting them feel even a fraction of his true power meant this wasn't a casual visit.

"Sect Master," the elders chorused, bowing with perfectly calculated respect - deep enough to show proper deference, but not so deep as to seem sycophantic.

Yuan waved away their formality with his usual elegant dismissal. Chen Yong watched the Sect Master study Song Xiang's image, wondering if he could finish this meeting in time to enjoy that jar of spirit wine he'd been saving. Probably not, given how things were developing.

"Interesting boy," Yuan murmured. "Though not quite what he appears to be."

Chen Yong held back another sigh as the other elders exchanged nervous glances. Centuries of cultivation, and they still acted like anxious disciples when their plans were disrupted.

"His talent is remarkable," Elder Sun ventured, always the first to test dangerous waters.

Chen Yong had to admire his consistency, if not his wisdom.

"Though as you say, there are... mysteries about his background," Elder Sun continued.

"Mysteries indeed." Yuan gestured, and the array shifted to show Song Xiang's energy circulation in microscopic detail. "Look here, and here. The flaws in his Heaven's Path forms - they're not random imperfections."

Chen Yong leaned forward, studying the highlighted patterns with new interest. Now that the old monster mentioned it...

"They're deliberate," he realized, earning an approving nod from Yuan. "The imperfections are too precisely placed, too carefully maintained to be accidents."

"Precisely." Yuan's smile held centuries of secrets. "Someone went to a great deal of trouble to make those flaws look natural. The question is... why?"

The chamber fell silent as implications rippled through the gathered elders like waves in a spiritual pond. A talented young cultivator with mysteriously perfect techniques and carefully crafted flaws... it painted a very different picture than a simple tragic prodigy.

"A test?" Elder Wang suggested, scholarly interest overcoming political ambition. "Or perhaps a message of some kind?"

"Both, I suspect," Yuan murmured. "Though the truly interesting question is who arranged this particular game, and to what end."

Chen Yong watched the Sect Master's expression, reading centuries of subtle politics in every minute shift. "You mean to take him as your disciple."

It wasn't a question, but the statement still sent shock waves through the chamber. Yuan hadn't taken a personal disciple in over five hundred years, not since...

Well. There were reasons the sect's records from that period were carefully sealed.

"Indeed." Yuan's smile gained an edge that reminded them all why he became the youngest sect leader in the sect's history. "Sometimes the best move in a game is to rewrite the rules entirely."

"But Sect Master," Elder Liu protested, political instincts warring with self-preservation, "his background is unverified, his techniques potentially compromised..."

"Which is why he requires more direct supervision than any of you could provide." Yuan's tone remained pleasant, but his spiritual pressure increased

just enough to make the point clear. "Unless you doubt my ability to handle any... complications that might arise?"

The elders quickly assured him that no such doubts existed, with the kind of emphatic agreement that suggested they'd really like to keep existing themselves.

"Excellent." Yuan gestured, and the array dissolved into motes of light. "I will announce my decision after the full evaluation results are processed. I trust there are no objections?"

The question was purely ceremonial, of course. Objecting to the Sect Master's decisions tended to be hazardous to both cultivation and continued breathing.

"Of course not, Sect Master," they chorused with perfect political unity born of centuries of survival instinct.

"Wonderful." Yuan turned to leave, then paused. "Oh, and Chen Yong? Do keep an eye on that curious boy with the perfect energy control. He is...rather interesting."

Chen Yong managed to keep his expression perfectly neutral, though internally he was already mourning the loss of his peaceful evening plans. Of course the Sect Master would choose him for this bothersome task. Eight hundred years of cultivation, and here he was, being assigned to babysit another supposedly special disciple.

"Of course, Sect Master," he replied, while mentally calculating how many meditation sessions this would cost him. He'd been planning to focus on his own breakthrough these next few months, but apparently the heavens had other plans. Or more accurately, Yuan had other plans, which tended to be far more troublesome than heavenly decrees.

Still, refusing wasn't an option. Not that Chen Yong would have refused anyway - he'd long ago learned that fighting against Yuan's schemes was like trying to swim upstream in a spiritual waterfall. Better to go along with it and hope this particular task wouldn't be too disruptive to his cultivation schedule. Though given the Sect Master's cryptic smile, he doubted he'd be that fortunate.

At least he could still enjoy that jar of spirit wine tonight. He'd probably need it.

Yuan's smile suggested he knew exactly how much that casual comment had disturbed them all. "Fascinating times we live in, wouldn't you say? So many young talents with unusual backgrounds appearing all at once. Almost as if someone arranged it..."

With that cheerful bit of existential uncertainty, the Sect Master vanished - not with a dramatic technique or flowing movement, but simply ceased to be present between one moment and the next.

The chamber remained silent for several long moments as the elders processed what had just happened. Their carefully laid political plans regarding Song Xiang lay in ruins, but none of them were quite foolish enough to complain about it.

"Well," Elder Sun finally said, his perpetual amusement somehow intact, "that was unexpected."

"The Sect Master taking a personal disciple after five centuries?" Elder Wang shook his head. "Unexpected doesn't begin to cover it."

Chen Yong resisted the urge to point out that very little about their Sect Master was ever truly unexpected. The man had been playing these games since before most of them were born.

"Not just any disciple," Elder Liu mused. "One with deliberately flawed Heaven's Path techniques and an obviously manufactured background. Either our Sect Master has finally gone senile..."

"He hasn't," Chen Yong cut in firmly. He hadn't lived this long by letting others drag him into potentially fatal conversations.

"Indeed not," Elder Sun agreed quickly. "Though I can't help but wonder about his comment regarding young talents with unusual backgrounds. First this Song Xiang with his suspiciously perfect techniques, then that boy with the strange energy optimization..."

"I'm sure the Sect Master has everything well in hand," Chen Yong said in the tone that meant 'let's stop talking about this before we attract unfortunate attention.'

The other elders took the hint, smoothly shifting to less potentially hazardous topics. But Chen Yong noticed they all carefully avoided mentioning Song Xiang, or anything else that might draw their leader's attention again.

Sometimes survival at their level meant knowing exactly when to stop asking questions. Though he couldn't help but wonder about Yuan's final comments...

Almost as if someone arranged it?

No, it's better to focus on the wine, Chen Yong decided. In his experience, questioning the Sect Master's cryptic statements rarely led anywhere pleasant.