

CULTIVATION IS CREATION

Chapter 2: First Steps

The Outer Disciples' Square was exactly what it said on the tin—a massive courtyard paved with the same blue-gray stone that seemed to be everywhere in this sect. What the name didn't convey was the sheer scale of the place, or the fact that it was currently packed with several hundred teenagers all trying very hard to look like they knew what they were doing.

I found myself a spot near the back of the gathering crowd, trying to mimic the straight-backed, hands-clasped-behind-back stance that seemed to be the default here. The original's memories were helpful, but they were more like watching a tutorial video than having actual muscle memory. Still, fake it till you make it, right?

"Seniors approaching!" someone hissed, and the crowd's nervous shuffling immediately ceased.

Five figures emerged from one of the larger buildings overlooking the square. Unlike our plain gray robes, their blue robes were decorated with intricate patterns that seemed to shift in the fading daylight. They moved with an uncanny grace that made them appear to be gliding rather than walking.

The one in the lead was a woman who looked to be in her thirties, though something told me appearances might be deceiving here. Her hair was done up in an elaborate style held in place by what looked like silver needles, and her robes bore additional white patterns that distinguished her from her companions.

"I am Senior Sister Liu," she announced, her voice carrying effortlessly across the square without seeming to raise it. "I oversee the training of Outer Disciples. You stand here because you have shown potential, but potential alone means nothing. Whether you rise or fall, succeed or fail, live or die—all will depend on your own efforts."

Well, that was cheerful.

"Tomorrow, you will begin your formal introduction to the arts of cultivation," she continued. "Tonight, you will receive your first lesson in what it means to be a disciple of Azure Peak Sect. Junior Brother Chen, proceed."

One of her companions stepped forward and made a gesture with his hands. Suddenly, the air grew heavy, as if the atmospheric pressure had doubled. Around me, people gasped and staggered. I found myself struggling to breathe, my knees threatening to buckle.

"This," Senior Sister Liu said calmly, "is merely a fraction of true spiritual pressure. As Outer Disciples, you will learn to withstand it, to move through it, to breathe despite it. Those who cannot..." She shrugged elegantly. "Well, the mortal world always needs more merchants and farmers."

The pressure increased. Someone to my left fell to their knees. I gritted my teeth, forcing myself to remain standing through sheer stubbornness. My whole body felt like it was being crushed by an invisible weight.

"Interesting," I heard Senior Sister Liu murmur, though she was too far away for normal hearing to pick up her voice. "A few show promise."

After what felt like hours but was probably only a few minutes, the pressure vanished. I nearly fell over from the sudden release, catching myself at the last moment. Around me, others weren't so lucky, sprawling on the stone courtyard as their legs gave out.

"Those still standing, step forward," Senior Sister Liu commanded.

I looked around. Out of what must have been three hundred new disciples, only about twenty of us remained on our feet. We formed a ragged line before the seniors, trying not to show how much that experience had rattled us.

"Your dormitory assignments are changed," she announced. "You will be moved to Dormitory One. This is not a reward—it is a recognition of capacity and thus an increase in expectations. Disappoint us, and you will find that demotion is the least of your concerns."

Great. Just what I needed—more attention.

"The rest of you," she addressed the broader crowd, many of whom were still picking themselves up off the ground, "remember this moment. Remember this feeling. It is but a taste of what awaits you on the path of cultivation. Return to your dormitories and reflect on whether you truly have the will to continue."

With that encouraging speech, she and her companions turned and left, their robes swishing dramatically in a wind I was pretty sure they'd generated themselves. Show-offs.

A younger disciple, probably only a year or two ahead of us, began calling out names and new room assignments for those of us who'd remained standing. I found myself assigned to Cell Five in Dormitory One. Apparently, I would have time to move my belongings after the evening meal.

Speaking of which, my new stomach was informing me rather insistently that it needed food. One of the servants pointed me toward a large building near the dormitories—the Outer Disciples' Dining Hall.

The hall was already crowded when I arrived, filled with both new disciples and older outer disciples who'd returned from whatever tasks had occupied them during the day. The setup was simple: show your identification tablet to receive a bowl of rice and whatever dishes were being served, then find a place to sit.

I ended up at a table with several other new disciples, all of whom looked as overwhelmed as I felt. The food was simple but surprisingly good—rice, some kind of stir-fried vegetables I didn't recognize, and a soup that tasted faintly medicinal.

"Did anyone else feel like they were dying during that pressure test?" one of my tablemates asked quietly. He was a skinny teen with nervous eyes, his hands still shaking slightly as he held his chopsticks.

"Pretty sure that was the point," another replied, this one a girl with short-cropped hair. "My cousin's in the Southern Cloud Sect. She said their initiation was even worse—they had to stand under a waterfall for an hour while enduring spiritual pressure."

"The Southern Cloud Sect sits on a mountain range famous for its spirit waterfalls," someone further down the table chimed in. "My family trades in cultivation resources—each sect's trials are usually related to their particular strengths."

I listened carefully while pretending to focus on my food. Every bit of information could be valuable, especially since I was starting with a massive disadvantage. Sure, I had the original's memories of this world's basic culture and customs, but those were the memories of a tailor's son—hardly comprehensive when it came to cultivation.

"I heard Azure Peak specializes in something called the Azure Path," I ventured, hoping to prompt more information.

"Of course they do," the trader's son replied, a bit condescendingly. "Azure Peak is one of the Five Great Sects of the Eastern Continent. Each has their own interpretation of the heavenly dao—Azure Peak focuses on transformation and adaptation, like water taking any shape while maintaining its essential nature."

That... actually explained nothing, but I nodded as if it made perfect sense.

The conversation continued, with various disciples sharing rumors and snippets of information they'd gleaned about the sect and cultivation in general. Most of it went over my head, but I filed away everything for later consideration.

After dinner, I returned to my original cell to gather my belongings. It didn't take long—I'd only been here for a few hours, after all. The new cell in Dormitory One was virtually identical to the old one, just located in a different building.

The story has been stolen; if detected on Amazon, report the violation.

As I was arranging my few possessions, someone knocked on the door frame. It was one of the disciples who'd been at my dinner table—the trader's son.

"I'm Wei Lin," he said without preamble. "Cell Six. Thought you might want these." He handed me a stack of what looked like handwritten notes.

"What are they?" I asked, leafing through the pages. They appeared to be some kind of study materials, with diagrams and explanations about basic cultivation concepts.

"Copied them from my family's archives before coming here," he said with a slight smirk. "Not supposed to have prior knowledge, but everyone does it if they can. Figured since you're next door and you didn't immediately start bragging about your family's secret techniques, you might actually be worth knowing."

I blinked at his bluntness. "Thanks. I'm Ke Yin."

"I know. You were one of the few who didn't look like they were about to pass out during the pressure test. Interesting, considering you're from..." he paused, obviously fishing for information.

"Floating Reed Village," I supplied, remembering to stick to the original Ke Yin's background.

Wei Lin's eyebrows rose slightly. "A village candidate? Now that is interesting. Well, read those tonight. Tomorrow's going to be... enlightening."

He left before I could ask what he meant, which was probably intentional. I settled down at my desk and began reading through the notes by the light of what looked like a glowing crystal embedded in the wall.

The basics, according to these notes, were both simpler and more complex than I'd expected. Every living thing apparently had something called a spiritual core, a sort of energy-based organ that existed alongside the physical body. Most people's cores remained dormant their entire lives, but cultivators learned to awaken and develop theirs.

Well, that explained why they'd tested village youth with jade pendants. They were looking for people with naturally sensitive spiritual cores.

The notes went into extensive detail about breathing exercises and meditation techniques, with warnings about the dangers of incorrect practice. Apparently, trying to force one's spiritual core to awaken too quickly could lead to something called qi deviation, which sounded extremely unpleasant.

I was deep in a passage about the importance of maintaining mental clarity during meditation when another bell rang—curfew. I changed into the sleeping robes provided with my sect outfit and lay down on the narrow bed.

Sleep didn't come easily. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw flashes of my death—the concrete rushing up to meet me, the sudden darkness, the void. Part of me still couldn't quite believe this was real. Maybe I was in a coma, and this was all some elaborate dream my dying brain had conjured up.

But no, everything felt too real. The slight roughness of the sect robes, the lingering taste of that medicinal soup, the weight of the spiritual pressure during the test—my imagination wasn't that good.

I must have dozed off eventually, because the next thing I knew, a gong was reverberating through the dormitory. Dawn. Time for morning assembly.

The pre-dawn air was crisp as I joined the stream of disciples heading to the square. Everyone moved with purpose, though whether that was genuine enthusiasm or fear of punishment, I couldn't tell.

This time, we were arranged in neat rows according to our dormitory assignments. Those of us who'd survived the pressure test were placed at the front, which made me distinctly uncomfortable. I preferred to observe from the back, but apparently that wasn't an option anymore.

Senior Sister Liu appeared again, this time accompanied by a dozen other senior disciples. They carried what looked like ceramic jugs, which they began distributing through the crowd.

"Today," she announced, "you begin your journey on the path of cultivation. In these vessels is Spirit Gathering Water, drawn from the sacred springs of Azure Peak. It will help awaken your spiritual cores—if you have the capacity for awakening."

When the jug reached me, I saw that it was filled with what looked like ordinary water, except that it seemed to shimmer slightly when I moved it. Following the example of those around me, I took a small sip.

It tasted like... well, like water, but somehow more so. Like the platonic ideal of water, if that makes any sense. It felt cool going down, then seemed to spread a gentle warmth through my chest.

"Close your eyes," Senior Sister Liu instructed. "Focus on that warmth. Feel it gathering, condensing. This is the first step on the path of cultivation—learning to sense your own spiritual core."

I did as instructed, concentrating on the strange warmth in my chest. At first, nothing seemed to happen, but gradually I became aware of... something. A sort of density in the center of my chest, like a drop of heavy rain suspended in still air.

"For most of you, this is all you will achieve today," Senior Sister Liu's voice continued. "A few may sense the shape of their core. Fewer still might—"

She was interrupted by a gasp from somewhere in the crowd. I heard murmurs and shifting feet, but I kept my eyes closed, focusing on that strange sensation in my chest. The warmth was growing stronger, the density more pronounced.

And then, suddenly, I wasn't just sensing it—I was seeing it. Not with my physical eyes, which were still closed, but with some other kind of perception. In the darkness behind my eyelids, a small point of light pulsed in rhythm with my heartbeat.

"Interesting," I heard Senior Sister Liu say, much closer than before. "Open your eyes, disciple."

I obeyed, blinking in the brightening dawn. She stood directly in front of me, studying me with an intensity that made me want to step back.

"How much did you see?" she asked.

"A... a point of light," I answered honestly. "Pulsing with my heartbeat."

She nodded slowly. "And the space around it?"

"Space?" I frowned. "I only saw the light."

"Hm." She made a gesture, and one of her companions handed her what looked like a marble made of the same jade as our identification tablets. "Hold this."

I took the marble, and immediately the point of light in my chest pulsed stronger. The jade began to glow with a soft blue light, just as it apparently had during my initial testing in the village.

"Very interesting," Senior Sister Liu murmured. "You may have fulfilled the first requirement for the Azure Path without even trying. We shall see." She raised her voice to address the crowd again. "Those who saw their core, step forward. Those who merely felt it, remain in place. Those who sensed nothing... consider this your first warning."

About thirty disciples stepped forward, including me and, I noticed, Wei Lin. Senior Sister Liu walked along our line, handing each of us one of the jade marbles.

"These are Spirit Resonance Beads," she explained. "They will help you visualize and interact with your core. Practice with them during your meditation. In one month, we will test your progress. Those who show sufficient advancement will begin true cultivation techniques. Those who do not..." She let the sentence hang.

The rest of the morning was spent learning basic meditation postures and breathing exercises. By lunch, my legs were cramping from sitting cross-legged for hours, and my head was swimming with terms like 'qi circulation' and 'spiritual meridians.'

"Not bad for a village boy," Wei Lin commented as we headed to the dining hall. "Though I notice you didn't mention seeing the space around your core."

I glanced at him sharply. "Did you?"

He smiled slightly. "Of course. My family has been preparing me for this since I could walk. The fact that you saw anything at all without preparation... like I said, interesting."

I was beginning to hate that word.

The afternoon was devoted to more mundane studies—reading and writing, basic sect history, and an introduction to what they called 'cultivation ethics.' This last one seemed particularly important, given how many times the instructor mentioned that violating these principles could result in immediate expulsion or worse.

By the time evening arrived, my brain felt as full as my aching muscles. I sat on my bed, rolling the Spirit Resonance Bead between my fingers and watching it glow in response to... whatever it was responding to.

A knock at my door revealed Wei Lin again, this time carrying what looked like a tea set.

"Spiritual Tea," he explained, inviting himself in and setting up the pot and cups on my desk. "Helps maintain clarity during evening meditation. My family exports it to three different sects."

I was starting to suspect his casual mentions of his family's business connections were less about bragging and more about establishing his value as an ally. Smart.

The tea had a subtle, almost ethereal flavor, and seemed to clear away some of the day's mental fog. As we drank, Wei Lin explained more about sect politics and the importance of building connections early.

"The sect talks about equality and merit," he said, "but reality is more complicated. Everyone has their own agenda, their own resources, their own secret techniques passed down through family or bought at great cost. The trick is finding your own advantages and leveraging them."

"And what advantage do you see in helping me?" I asked directly.

He smiled, apparently appreciating the bluntness. "You're an unknown quantity. No family techniques, no obvious backing, yet you performed as well as those of us who've been preparing for years. That makes you either incredibly lucky or incredibly talented. Either way, worth knowing."

I couldn't help but laugh at the irony. If he only knew how right he was about the 'lucky' part.

After he left, I spent several hours practicing with the Spirit Resonance Bead, trying to better visualize that point of light in my chest. According to Wei Lin's smuggled notes, this was just the first step. Eventually, cultivators learned to expand and shape their spiritual cores, transforming them into something called an 'inner world.'

I was still puzzling over what exactly that meant when curfew bell rang. As I lay in bed, staring at the ceiling, I found myself actually looking forward to tomorrow's lessons. Death and reincarnation aside, there was something undeniably exciting about learning to do what basically amounted to magic.

Of course, that excitement was tempered by the very real possibility of washing out and being sent back to a village I barely remembered, or worse.