

CULTIVATION IS CREATION

Chapter 4: Learning the Basics

Keeping a secret in a sect full of cultivators is about as easy as hiding a penguin in a peacock sanctuary. Everyone's always watching, analyzing, looking for any advantage or weakness they can exploit. And here I was, trying to conceal the fact that I had what amounted to a spiritual video game interface in my head.

"Your energy circulation is improving, Young Brother Ke Yin," Senior Sister Liu commented during morning practice. "Though your method is... unconventional."

I tried not to look nervous. "Unconventional how, Senior Sister?"

She made a vague gesture with her hand. "Most beginners circulate spiritual energy like water flowing through channels. Yours moves more... systematically. Almost mechanical in its precision."

Warning: Circulation pattern potentially identifiable.

Recommend randomizing flow variance by 15% to appear more natural.

I silently thanked Azure for the heads-up. The little spirit had proven invaluable over the past few days, helping me navigate the basics of cultivation while keeping our unique situation under wraps.

"I've been practicing very diligently, Senior Sister," I said carefully. Which was true – I just didn't mention the helpful UI elements and progress bars that made it significantly easier.

She studied me for a moment longer before moving on to critique the next disciple. I let out a quiet breath of relief.

"You're attracting attention," Wei Lin muttered from his meditation cushion beside me. "That's the third time this week Senior Sister Liu has singled you out."

"I'm just following the basic instructions," I protested. "Same as everyone else."

Wei Lin snorted softly. "Right. And I'm secretly the Sect Master's long-lost son. Nobody progresses this smoothly without special techniques. Which, I remind you, my family would be happy to provide..."

"Still focusing on the basics," I cut him off. This was becoming a daily conversation. "But I appreciate the offer."

The truth was, I did have special techniques – they just weren't the kind Wei Lin was thinking of.

Current Status: Inner World

Size: 2.3 cubic meters

Energy Density: 23/100

Features Unlocked: Basic Circulation Paths, Energy Collection Array (Level 1)

Azure had explained that while every cultivator eventually developed an inner world with its own spiritual manifestation, my system provided unique advantages. For one thing, I could see exactly how everything worked, complete with numbers and progress bars. For another, Azure wasn't limited to the usual role of a spiritual guide.

"Most inner world spirits are like gardeners," he'd explained during one of our evening training sessions. "They help maintain the spiritual landscape and provide basic guidance. Thanks to the System, I can offer much more precise assistance."

The morning session eventually ended, and we broke for the mid-day meal. I had just sat down with my bowl of rice when a commotion broke out near the dining hall entrance.

"Inner Disciples!"

The warning spread quickly, and everyone scrambled to stand and bow as a group of older disciples entered. Their robes were more elaborate than ours, with patterns that seemed to ripple like water catching sunlight.

"Well, well," one of them said, scanning the room. "So, these are the new outer disciples everyone's been talking about?"

I kept my head down, remembering the warnings about proper etiquette. That didn't stop me from noticing how the inner disciple's spiritual pressure filled the room like a heavy fog.

Warning: Elevated spiritual pressure detected

Recommended Action: Maintain steady circulation to prevent energy disruption

Current Resistance: 45%

Thanks, Azure. Very helpful.

"You there," the inner disciple said suddenly. "The one with the steady spiritual resistance. Look up."

Oh no.

I raised my head slowly to meet his gaze. He was younger than I expected, probably only a few years older than us outer disciples, but his eyes held the weight of significant cultivation behind them.

"What's your name?" he demanded.

"Ke Yin, Outer Disciple," I replied formally. "Of Floating Reed Village."

"A village recruit?" He raised an eyebrow. "Interesting. Your spiritual energy is unusually... structured for someone without a cultivation background."

Warning: Attention level rising

Recommend activating Spiritual Camouflage Protocol

Note: This will reduce cultivation efficiency by 20% but make energy patterns appear more natural

I really needed to thank Azure for adding these features.

"I study the basic techniques very carefully," I said, which was becoming my standard response to such observations.

The inner disciple smirked. "Is that so? Well, then you won't mind demonstrating your... careful study. Report to the Outer Disciples' Training Ground after the evening meal. I think it's time for some practical experience."

Great. Just great.

"You're in trouble now," Wei Lin whispered after the inner disciples had left. "That was Zhou Ming, one of the rising stars among the inner disciples. He's known for taking a... special interest in promising outer disciples."

"Special interest how?"

"Let's just say his last 'training partner' spent a week in the healing pavilion."

Wonderful. As if I didn't have enough to worry about.

New Task Available: Survive Training with Inner Disciple Zhou

Difficulty: Intermediate

Reward: Increased combat experience, potential technique insights

Failure Consequence: Significant physical injury, possible cultivation setback

"Not helping, Azure," I muttered under my breath.

"What was that?" Wei Lin asked.

"Nothing. Just... mentally preparing myself."

The rest of the day's classes passed in a blur. I tried to focus on the lecture about spiritual beast classification, but my mind kept wandering to the evening's impending 'training session.'

Royal Road is the home of this novel. Visit there to read the original and support the author.

Would you like to review combat-applicable features? Azure suggested during a brief meditation break.

"I have combat features?" I thought back at him.

Basic ones, yes. The System includes fundamental martial analysis capabilities. I can provide real-time feedback on energy flows and movement patterns. It won't make you an instant combat expert, but it might help you avoid the worst outcomes.

Well, that was something at least.

Evening came far too quickly. I made my way to the training ground, trying to ignore the small crowd that had gathered to watch. Apparently, word had spread about Zhou Ming's interest in the 'village prodigy.'

"Ah, you actually came," Zhou said, standing in the center of the practice ring. "I half expected you to hide in your dormitory."

"You honored me with your instruction, Inner Disciple Zhou," I replied carefully. "How could I refuse?"

He smirked. "Such proper manners. Let's see if your cultivation is as refined as your courtesy. Attack me."

I blinked. "I'm sorry?"

"Attack me," he repeated. "Show me these basic techniques you've studied so carefully. Don't worry – I'll restrict my cultivation to the first level of Qi Condensation. That should give you a fighting chance... maybe."

The crowd whispered excitedly. Even with him restricting himself, this was like putting a kindergartener up against a professional fighter.

Analyzing opponent...

Detected Cultivation Level: Qi Condensation Stage 6 (Currently suppressed to Stage 1)

Combat Style: Mountain Maker

Recommended Strategy: Maintain distance, focus on defensive movements, conserve energy

"Today would be nice," Zhou called out, his tone mocking.

Well, nothing for it but to try. I settled into the basic martial stance we'd been taught, feeling my spiritual energy respond to the System's optimized circulation patterns.

Combat Mode Activated

Enabling real-time analysis

Movement prediction algorithms online

I moved forward cautiously, throwing a basic palm strike that any cultivator should know. Zhou didn't even bother dodging – he simply stood there as my attack bounced off his spiritual pressure like it had hit a wall.

"Pathetic," he said. "Is that really all you've learned? Here, let me show you how it's done."

His counter-attack was like lightning. One moment he was standing still, the next his palm was headed straight for my chest.

Incoming attack pattern detected!

Recommended action: 45-degree pivot, redirect force downward

I moved instinctively, following the System's guidance. Zhou's palm strike brushed past me, close enough that I felt the spiritual energy crackling along my robes.

The crowd's whispers grew louder. Even Zhou looked momentarily surprised.

"Better," he admitted. "But still not good enough."

The next few minutes were a lesson in humility, System assistance or not. Zhou's attacks came from impossible angles, each one carrying enough force to send me flying if they connected directly. The best I could do was partially deflect them, turning direct hits into glancing blows.

Warning: Energy reserves at 47%

Multiple bruising detected

Recommendation: Implement emergency withdrawal strategy

"I haven't even started using techniques yet," Zhou taunted, barely looking winded. "Shall we move beyond basic movements?"

Before I could respond (probably with more polite groveling), a sharp voice cut through the evening air.

"What is going on here?"

Senior Sister Liu stood at the edge of the training ground, her expression stormy. The gathered crowd immediately began to disperse.

"Just some friendly practice, Senior Sister," Zhou said smoothly. "Testing the new disciples' progress."

"Is that so?" Her gaze swept over my disheveled appearance and probably numerous bruises. "And did you gain the insights you sought sparring someone five substages below you, Inner Disciple Zhou?"

Something passed between them, some unspoken communication that went over my battered head. Finally, Zhou bowed slightly.

"Indeed, Senior Sister. The outer disciples show... potential. With proper guidance, of course."

"Of course," she replied coolly. "I'm sure you have more important matters to attend to."

Zhou took the diplomatic dismissal for what it was. He gave me one last measuring look before departing, his robes swishing dramatically. Show-off.

"Report to the healing pavilion," Senior Sister Liu instructed me. "Then return to your dormitory and reflect on this experience."

I bowed, wincing at my sore muscles. "Yes, Senior Sister. Thank you for your timely arrival."

A ghost of a smile crossed her face. "Timely? I've been watching for the past ten minutes. You survived longer than expected against a superior opponent while maintaining remarkable spiritual control. That itself is a valuable lesson, wouldn't you say?"

She walked away before I could respond, leaving me to contemplate her words.

Combat Analysis Complete Performance Rating: C+ Areas for Improvement:

- *Energy efficiency (42% optimal)*
- *Attack timing (63% optimal)*
- *Defensive positioning (71% optimal)*

New Skills Unlocked:

- *Basic Combat Analysis*
- *Movement Prediction (Level 1)*

"A C+?" I thought indignantly at Azure as I limped toward the healing pavilion.
"I survived against an inner disciple!"

Technically, you survived against an inner disciple deliberately holding back to an enormous degree, Azure pointed out. But you did exceed base survival expectations by 47%, so that's something!

Great. Even my spiritual AI assistant was a critic.

The healing pavilion was a peaceful place, filled with the scent of medicinal herbs and staffed by disciples specifically trained in healing techniques. The elderly disciple who treated me clicked her tongue disapprovingly at my bruises.

"Fighting with inner disciples already?" she muttered, applying some kind of cooling salve. "You outer disciples get more ambitious every year."

"In my defense," I said, "I tried very hard not to fight him."

She snorted. "Next time try harder. Or at least learn some proper defensive techniques first." She pressed her palm against my back, and I felt cooling spiritual energy ease the worst of the bruising. "There. Try not to need my services again too soon."

By the time I made it back to my dormitory, most of the pain had faded to a dull ache. Wei Lin was waiting outside my door.

"You're alive!" he said, sounding genuinely relieved. "And walking! That's more than Yuan Mei managed after his 'training session' with Zhou Ming."

"Barely alive," I corrected, unlocking my door. "And walking is a generous description of what I'm doing right now."

He followed me inside, producing a familiar tea set. "Medicinal spirit tea," he offered. "Good for recovering from spiritual exhaustion. Only thirty contribution points per packet, for a friend."

I couldn't help but laugh. "You're trying to sell to me while I'm injured? That's cold, Wei Lin."

He shrugged, already preparing the tea. "The sect rewards those who seize opportunities. Besides, you'll need every advantage you can get now that you've caught Zhou Ming's attention."

"What do you mean?"

"He only bothers to test disciples he thinks have potential," Wei Lin explained. "And you survived his test while displaying, and I quote, 'remarkable spiritual control.' That makes you interesting. Being interesting in Azure Peak Sect is..."

"Dangerous?"

"I was going to say potentially profitable, but yes, also dangerous." He handed me a cup of tea. "So, about those family techniques I mentioned..."

"Still focusing on basics," I said automatically.

He sighed. "Your funeral. Speaking of which, morning assembly is in six hours. Try not to die before then?"

After he left, I settled into meditation position, wincing slightly. The spirit tea helped, I had to admit. Maybe I should look into bulk ordering...

Entering Inner WorldProcessing combat experience data...

Updating spiritual architecture...

My inner world had changed since its first formation. The empty void now contained glowing circulation paths that pulsed with spiritual energy, and a simple array near the center helped collect and refine ambient energy. It wasn't much compared to what experienced cultivators could create, but it was progress.

Azure materialized, looking concerned. "You took significant damage in that encounter, Master. Should we prioritize defensive improvements?"

"What are my options?"

"Let's first review the battle analysis."

A three-dimensional replay appeared in the void, showing the fight from multiple angles. I could see now how many openings I'd left, how inefficient some of my movements had been even with the System's guidance.

"Can we use this to improve?" I asked.

Azure nodded. "The System can help optimize your responses based on this data. It won't make you an expert fighter, but it should help you avoid the worst mistakes next time."

"Next time? There's going to be a next time?"

"Given your observed rate of cultivation progress and the political dynamics within the sect, the probability of future combat encounters is approximately 89%," Azure reported cheerfully.

"That was a rhetorical question!"

"Oh. Should I disable probability calculations for rhetorical questions?"

I sighed. "No, keep them. They might be useful. What should we focus on for now?"

"Given current resources and training requirements, I recommend continuing to perfect basic circulation while gradually incorporating combat movement patterns. Once we achieve optimal efficiency, we can begin expanding the inner world's space and implementing more advanced features."

That sounded reasonable. I was about to agree when a thought struck me.

"Azure, what exactly are you? I mean, I know you're my inner world spirit, but you seem... different from how the lectures describe spiritual manifestations."

He tilted his head, considering. "I am a unique existence created by the interaction between your transmigrated soul, this world's spiritual systems, and the System interface. I have aspects of a traditional inner world spirit, yes, but also elements of what you call artificial intelligence. I exist to help you navigate this new existence and optimize your cultivation path."

"And the System itself?"

"Think of it as training wheels for your soul," he suggested. "Your modern Earth consciousness isn't naturally equipped to handle cultivation concepts, so the System translates everything into terms you can understand and work with. As you progress, you'll rely on it less and less directly, though its benefits will remain."

"So I'm not cheating?"

Azure actually laughed at that. "Master, you died and transmigrated into another world. I think the normal rules stopped applying somewhere around

then. Besides, every cultivator has advantages they were born with or stumbled into. Yours just happens to be more... systemized."

He had a point. And it wasn't like I was using the System to directly power up or skip stages – it just helped me understand and optimize what I was already seeing.