

CULTIVATION IS CREATION

Chapter 9: World Hopping for Beginners

You know what's terrifying? Waking up from a nightmare where you actually died, in a world with two suns, while some cosmic horror cosplayer turned everyone into pretty red mist. And the worst part? It wasn't even a nightmare.

I came to gasping like a fish that had just discovered water wasn't all it was cracked up to be. My hands shook as I patted myself down - same cultivation robes, same meditation cushion, same small room in Azure Peak Sect. No blood-stained miller's apron or rusty sword in sight.

"Master! We're back!" Azure popped into existence, looking like a kid who'd just broken mom's favorite vase and was trying to act casual about it. "So... how did you find our interdimensional vacation?"

"Azure," I wheezed, still trying to remember how lungs worked, "please tell me I hallucinated everything about the past few hours. The two suns, the raiders, the floating death wizard..."

"Oh no, that was all quite real! Though I must say, your combat performance was surprisingly adequate for someone who'd never held a sword before. Well, that body had never held a sword. You technically have, but not really, since—"

"Azure."

"Yes, Master?"

"How long were we gone? Because it felt like hours of running and fighting and generally trying not to die in creative new ways."

Azure shifted uncomfortably, his usual know-it-all demeanor flickering like bad wifi. "Ah, about that... Would you believe me if I said three seconds?"

I stared at him. "Three. Seconds."

"Give or take a millisecond! Think of it like binge-watching an entire Netflix series, except you did it in the time it takes to sneeze and there was way more deadly radiation!"

"Wait," I sat up straighter, momentarily distracted from my existential crisis.
"Netflix? Since when does my spiritual guide know about streaming services?"

"Oh!" Azure brightened, looking pleased I'd noticed. "I've had time to process some of your memories, they provided me with a complete Earth cultural database! Though I'm still not sure I completely understand all of it. For instance, I understand the concept of 'streaming wars' but fail to see how they compare to actual sect warfare. Far less spiritual energy involved!"

"Can we focus on the whole 'three seconds' thing? Are you telling me I just... collapsed for three seconds while experiencing several hours of trauma in murder-world?"

"Exactly! Though we're not entirely sure if the time ratio is fixed. Could be different for each world! The System's still crunching the metaphysical numbers on that one." He paused. "On the bright side, at least you didn't miss morning meditation?"

"Great. So now I have to worry about randomly passing out AND possibly dying in alternate realities. Any other fun side effects I should know about?"

He conjured up a status window that made me want to cry:

Status Update:

Soul Essence: 10/300 (Critical Depletion)

Spiritual Essence: 246/246 (Stable)

Physical Essence: 215/215 (Unchanged)

New Ability Unlocked: Worldwalker's Sojourn

Description: Hop between realities like a metaphysical grasshopper!

Cost: Your soul essence, apparently. Like, a lot of it.

Warning: Maybe don't do that again until we figure out how to not die?

"So," I said with all the calm of someone who'd just discovered they were an interdimensional tourist with terrible luck, "want to explain why you didn't mention this whole 'reality-hopping' thing was possible? Or maybe why it burns through soul essence like Wei Lin through his father's credit at the sect store?"

Azure shifted uncomfortably, his usual know-it-all demeanor replaced with what I can only describe as spiritual foot-shuffling. "I... may have only just found out about this myself. The System kind of just... dropped this update on me?"

"Aren't you the System?"

"Not... exactly?" He brightened, clearly hoping enthusiasm would distract from the awkwardness. "Think of me more like your friendly neighborhood UI! I was just a baby spirit before the System gave me an upgrade package. Now I'm like Siri, but for cultivation! With better jokes."

"Your jokes are terrible."

"They're systematically optimized for maximum groan value!"

I flopped back onto my bed, every part of me aching in ways I didn't know were possible. "Great. My spiritual guide is having an identity crisis. Any other bombshells you want to drop? Secret cultivation techniques? Hidden boss battles? A tendency to accidentally conquer other dimensions?"

"Well, about that last one..." Azure brought up another window. "The Worldwalker ability is fascinating! Though we should probably wait until you're not about to pass out to experiment with it."

"Good call. Any idea how long that'll take?"

"At your current recovery rate? About two months. Though we might be able to speed that up with proper soul cultivation techniques..."

"Tomorrow," I mumbled, already feeling consciousness slipping away. "We'll figure everything out tomorrow..."

I dreamed of Maya and Henrik, of their final stand against impossible odds. Could I have saved them? Done something differently? All my systematic cultivation hadn't meant much in a world without spiritual energy. I'd been worse than useless - I'd been normal.

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The morning gong dragged me back to consciousness way too early. I cracked an eye open to find Azure hovering over me with his usual too-cheerful expression.

"Good morning, Master! Your soul essence has recovered by six whole points during your rest. At this rate, you'll be ready for another potentially fatal interdimensional journey in... approximately never!"

"Thanks, Azure. Very helpful."

Status Update:

Soul Essence: 16/300 (+6 from rest, still pathetic)

Spiritual Essence: 246/246 (Show-off)

Physical Essence: 215/215 (At least something's normal)

"You know," Azure mused as I tried to remember how legs worked, "for someone who died tripping over their shoelaces, you handled yourself pretty well in that other world. The System's combat assistance helped, but still..."

"I got lucky. And then I got very unlucky." I managed to stand, though the room took a few seconds to stop spinning. "We need to figure this out. The soul essence, the world-hopping, all of it. Because next time? I might end up somewhere even worse."

"Worse than a world with reality-warping sun radiation and psychotic raiders?"

"Given my luck? Definitely."

A knock at my door interrupted whatever witty response Azure was cooking up. Wei Lin's voice drifted through the wood: "Ke Yin? You missed morning practice. Senior Sister Liu is not happy."

"Great," I muttered. "Because I needed more problems today."

I opened the door to find Wei Lin looking unusually concerned. "You look terrible," he announced cheerfully. "Like you spent all night wrestling with profound cultivation mysteries. Or possibly a bear."

"Thanks. That's exactly the ego boost I needed this morning."

He invited himself in, already pulling cultivation supplies from his seemingly endless pockets. "Fortunately for you, my family has an excellent remedy for spiritual exhaustion. Only fifty contribution points, and it comes with a free consultation on proper cultivation techniques!"

"Still focusing on basics," I said automatically, then paused. "Actually... what do you know about soul cultivation?"

Wei Lin's eyes lit up like it was spiritual resource discount day. "Finally asking the interesting questions! Though soul techniques are pretty advanced. My family has some excellent beginner manuscripts..."

"Library first," I cut him off. "Sales pitch later."

"You're no fun anymore." But he was already heading for the door. "Come on then. Let's go find you some proper cultivation methods before you actually collapse. Because if you die, who's going to buy all my overpriced techniques?"

"Your concern is touching."

"I know! I've been practicing my sincere merchant face."

As we walked toward the library, I couldn't help but wonder what other worlds were out there, waiting to try and kill me in new and exciting ways. At least this time I'd have some warning.

Probably.

Maybe.

...I was so dead.

The Azure Peak Sect library turned out to be less "mystical repository of ancient wisdom" and more "that one university library where students go to cry during finals week." Towering shelves carved into the mountain itself held everything from basic meditation guides to what looked suspiciously like cultivation self-help books. "Top Ten Tricks to Breakthrough Success!" probably wasn't the profound knowledge the sect founders had in mind.

"Soul cultivation methods are usually restricted," Wei Lin explained as we navigated the labyrinth of knowledge. "Too many disciples trying fancy techniques they weren't ready for. Apparently, having your soul explode is bad for sect recruitment."

"You don't say." I scanned the shelves, trying not to feel overwhelmed by the sheer volume of information. "Any chance they have a 'Soul Cultivation for Dummies' section?"

"Actually..." He reached up and pulled down a dusty tome. "The Azure Soul Nourishment Method is pretty close. Basic, reliable, and most importantly - free."

"Free? In this economy?"

"The sect figures if you're going to mess with soul techniques, better to start with the safe ones." He grinned. "Though if you're interested in more advanced methods, my family—"

"Still focusing on basics!"

We spent the next few hours combing through the library's soul cultivation section. Most of the techniques were way beyond my level - things like "Grand Soul Dominion Method" and "Path of the Eternal Spirit" that probably required more cultivation progress than I'd make in ten lifetimes.

"Found another one!" Wei Lin called from behind a particularly precarious stack of scrolls. "The Gentle Soul Nurturing Guide. Says it's good for... recovery and stability?"

Azure popped up in my inner world, already analyzing. "Compatible with your current cultivation base. Modest benefits, but low risk of catastrophic soul implosion."

"Always a plus," I muttered.

"What was that?"

"Nothing! Just... thinking out loud."

Wei Lin gave me that look again - the one that said he knew I was hiding something but couldn't quite figure out what. "You know, most people don't suddenly develop an interest in soul cultivation without a reason."

"Maybe I'm just thorough?"

"Right. And I'm secretly the Sect Master's long-lost son."

"Are you?"

"No, but the fact that you had to ask hurts my feelings." He dumped another stack of books on the table. "Here. Basic soul theory. You'll need to understand the fundamentals before trying any techniques."

I picked up the top volume, "Understanding Your Spiritual Core: A Beginner's Guide to Not Exploding." Charming.

"Master," Azure chimed in, "I've been analyzing the soul cultivation texts. Most focus on gradual enhancement rather than rapid recovery. However, combining multiple methods might—"

A commotion from the library entrance cut off whatever optimization strategy he was about to suggest. Senior Sister Liu's voice carried through the stacks: "The monthly evaluation requirements have been updated. All outer disciples must demonstrate significant progress in their chosen cultivation path."

"Oh good," I sighed. "More pressure. Just what I needed."

Wei Lin was already shoving books into my arms. "Take these. Study fast. The evaluations are in two weeks, and trust me - you don't want to fail."

"What happens if we fail?"

His expression turned serious. "Remember Yuan Mei? Failed his evaluation last month?"

"Yeah?"

"He's cleaning spiritual beast stables now. For the rest of his life."

Well, that was motivating in a terrifying sort of way.

Back in my room, I spread out the soul cultivation manuals and settled in for a long night of study. Azure hovered nearby, providing his usual commentary.

"The Azure Soul Nourishment Method seems promising," he reported.

"Though the diagrams are rather... artistic. I don't think souls actually look like happy little clouds."

"Focus on the important parts. How long to learn it?"

"Basic proficiency should take about a week. Unless..."

I knew that tone. "Unless what?"

"Well, the System could optimize the learning process. Might cut the time in half. Though it would cost some spiritual essence to process..."

Status Update:

Soul Essence: 16/300 (Still pathetic)

Spiritual Essence: 246/246 (Available for optimization)

Physical Essence: 215/215 (Unchanged)

"Do it," I decided. "Better to take a temporary hit to spiritual essence than risk another world-hop with no way to recover."

"Excellent choice! Initiating optimization protocols. Warning: Side effects may include mild existential dread and a sudden appreciation for metaphysical mathematics."

"Your warning labels need work."

As Azure began processing the soul cultivation method, I couldn't help but wonder about the other worlds out there. What if next time I landed somewhere even worse than the Two Suns world? What if I couldn't bring my cultivation? What if—

A knock at my door interrupted my spiral of paranoia.

"Ke Yin?" Lin Mei's voice. "Senior Sister Chen is looking for you. Something about missing your herb garden duties?"

Right. Because interdimensional travel wasn't an excuse for slacking off on regular sect responsibilities.

"Coming!" I called back, then thought at Azure: "How long until the optimization is done?"

"Approximately six hours. Though I should warn you about potential side effects of rushing soul cultivation techniques—"

"Later. Right now I need to go convince Senior Sister Chen not to turn me into fertilizer."

Sometimes I missed the simplicity of my old life. Sure, it had ended with an embarrassing death-by-shoelace, but at least I hadn't had to juggle cultivation politics, soul essence management, and the constant threat of accidentally falling into other realities.

Then again, my old life hadn't come with supernatural powers and a snarky spiritual AI assistant. So maybe it balanced out.

Sort of.

Probably not.

...I really hope this dying thing isn't a reoccurring theme.