CULTIVATION IS CREATION

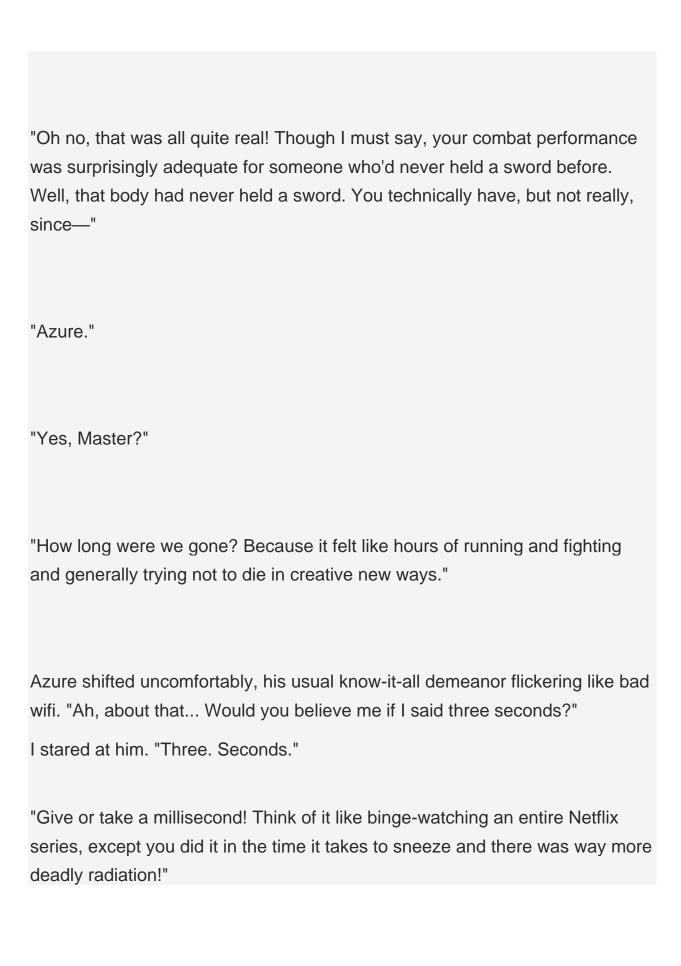
Chapter 9: World Hopping for Beginners

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..."



"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!"

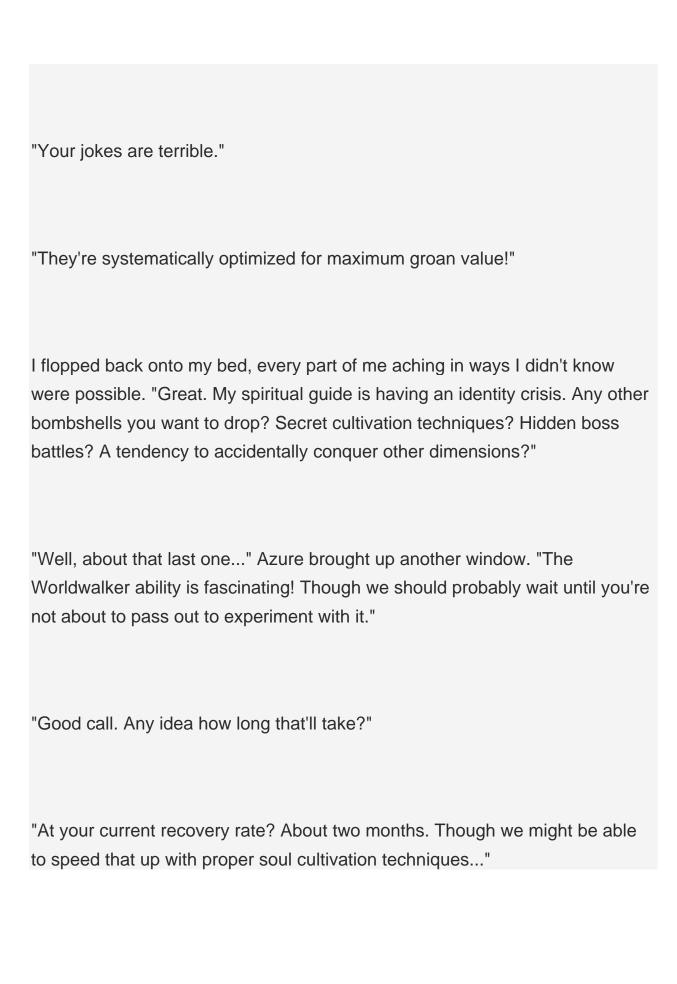
"Can we focus on the whole 'three seconds' thing? Are you telling me I just... collapsed for three seconds while experiencing several hours of trauma in murder-world?"

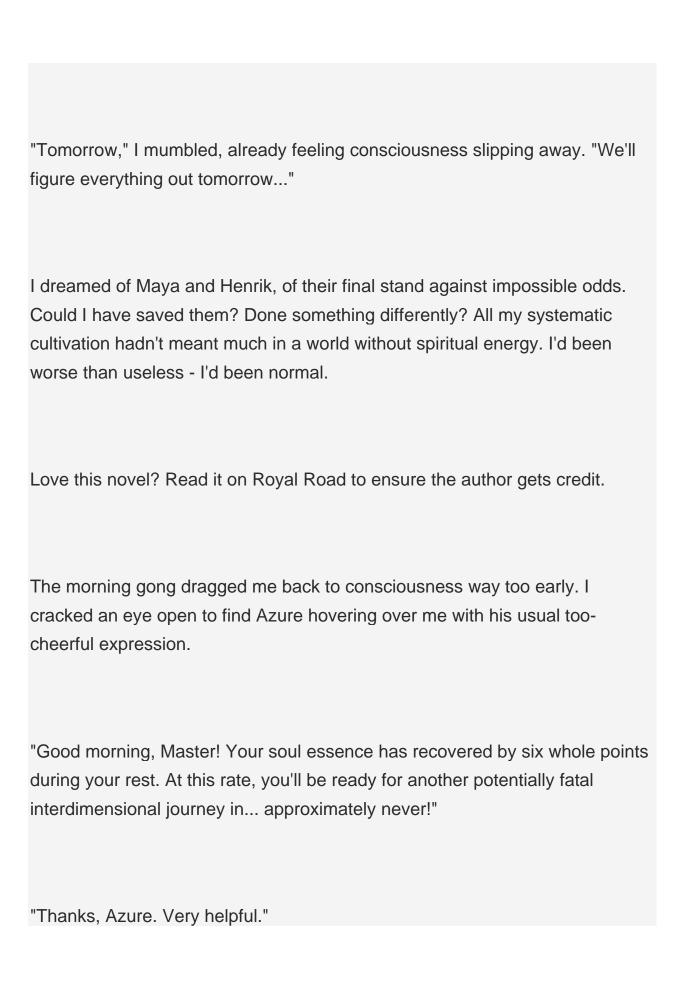
"Exactly! Though we're not entirely sure if the time ratio is fixed. Could be different for each world! The System's still crunching the metaphysical numbers on that one." He paused. "On the bright side, at least you didn't miss morning meditation?"

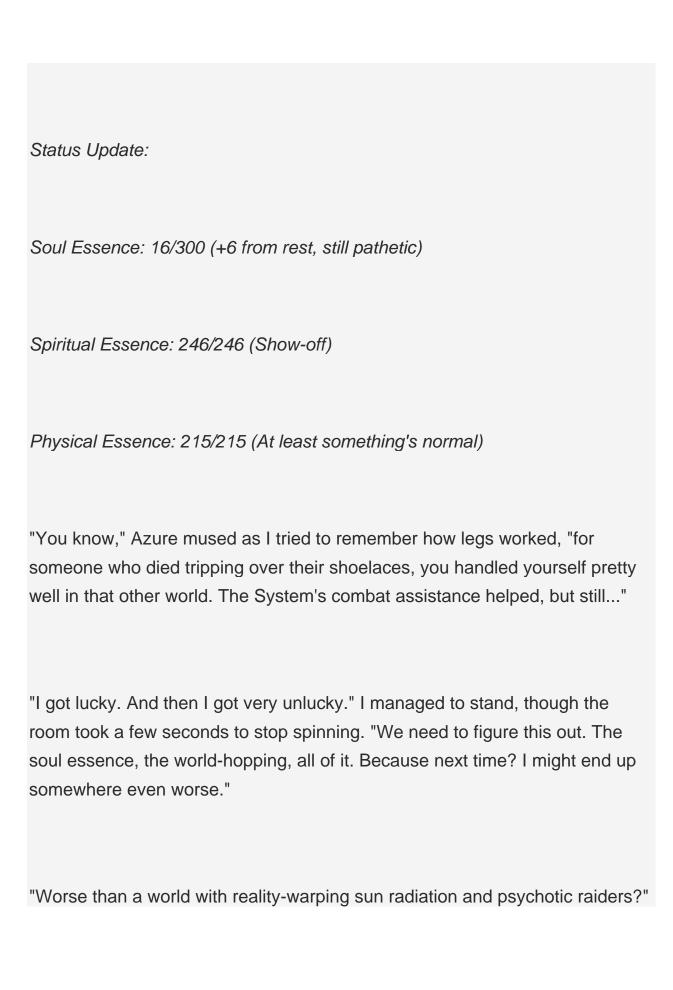
"Great. So now I have to worry about randomly passing out AND possibly dying in alternate realities. Any other fun side effects I should know about?"

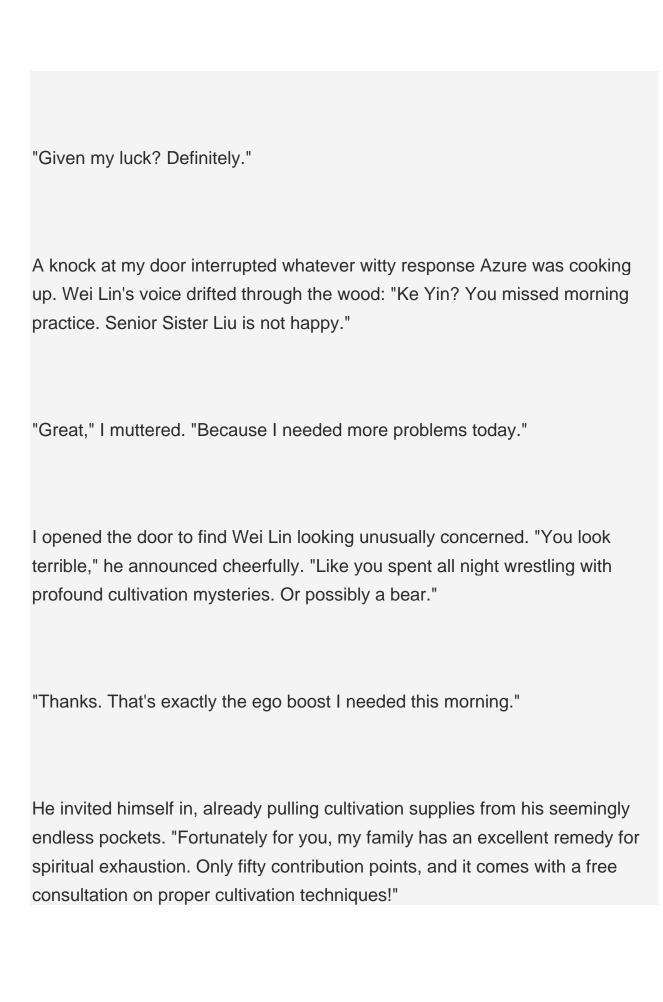
He conjured up a status window that made me want to cry:
Status Update:
Soul Essence: 10/300 (Critical Depletion)
Spiritual Essence: 246/246 (Stable)
Physical Essence: 215/215 (Unchanged)
New Ability Unlocked: Worldwalker's Sojourn
Description: Hop between realities like a metaphysical grasshopper!
Cost: Your soul essence, apparently. Like, a lot of it.

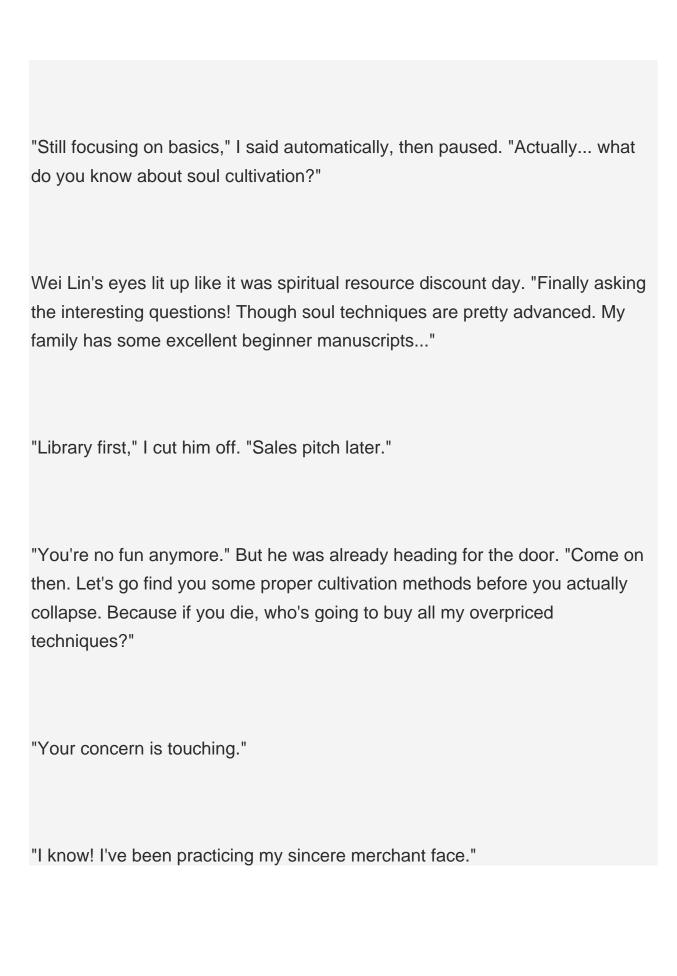
Warning: Maybe don't do that again until we figure out how to not die?
"So," I said with all the calm of someone who'd just discovered they were an interdimensional tourist with terrible luck, "want to explain why you didn't mention this whole 'reality-hopping' thing was possible? Or maybe why it burns 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."
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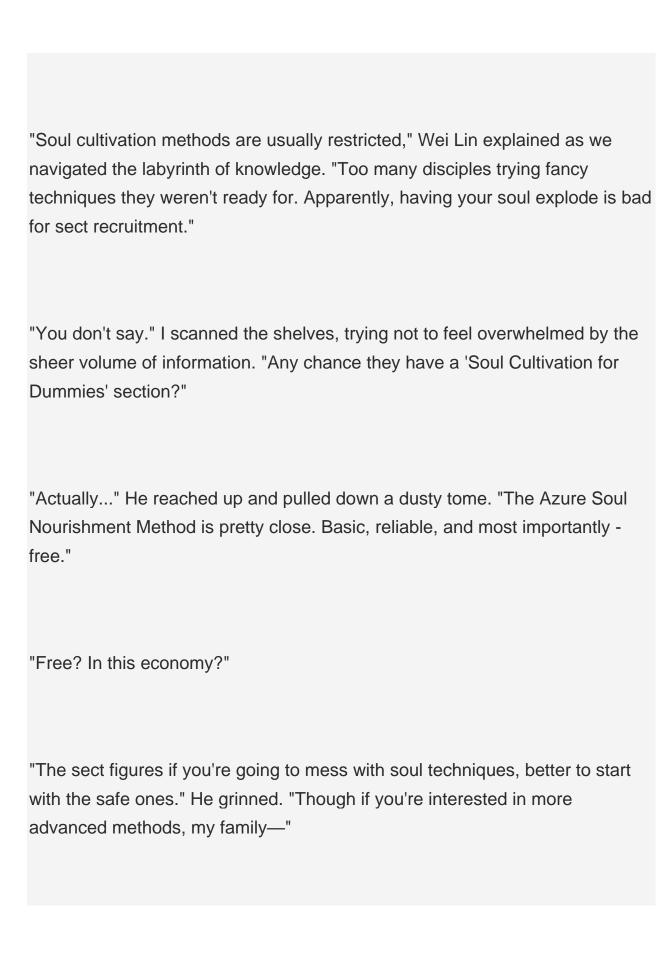


As we walked toward the library, I couldn't help but wonder what other worlds were out there, waiting to try and kill me in new and exciting ways. At least this time I'd have some warning.
Probably.
Maybe.
I was so dead.

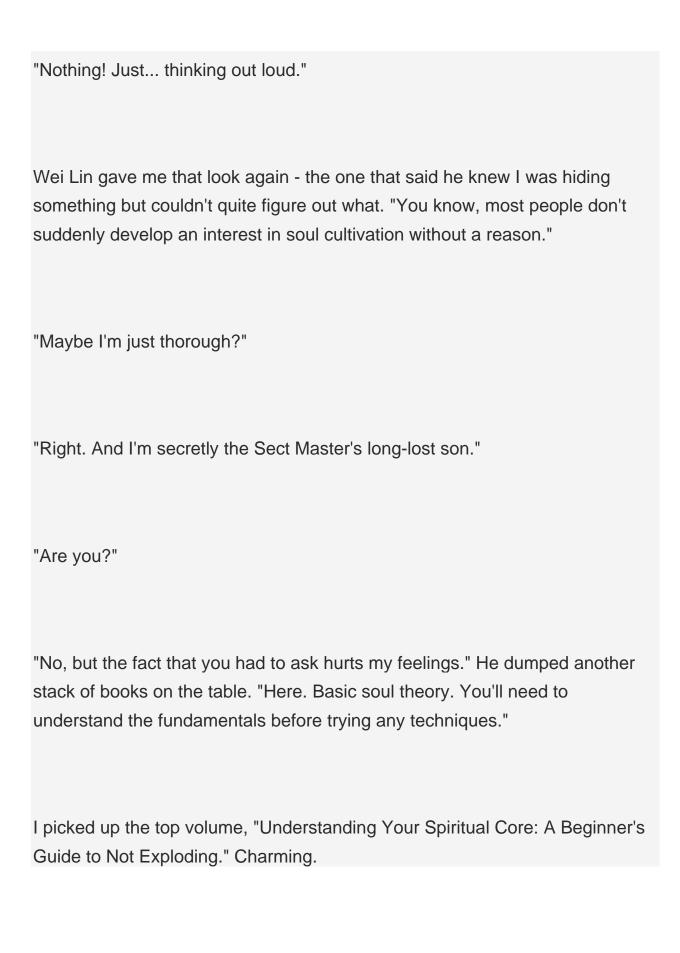
The Azure Peak Sect library turned out to be less "mystical repository of ancient wisdom" and more "that one university library where students go to
cry during finals week." Towering shelves carved into the mountain itself held
everything from basic meditation guides to what looked suspiciously like

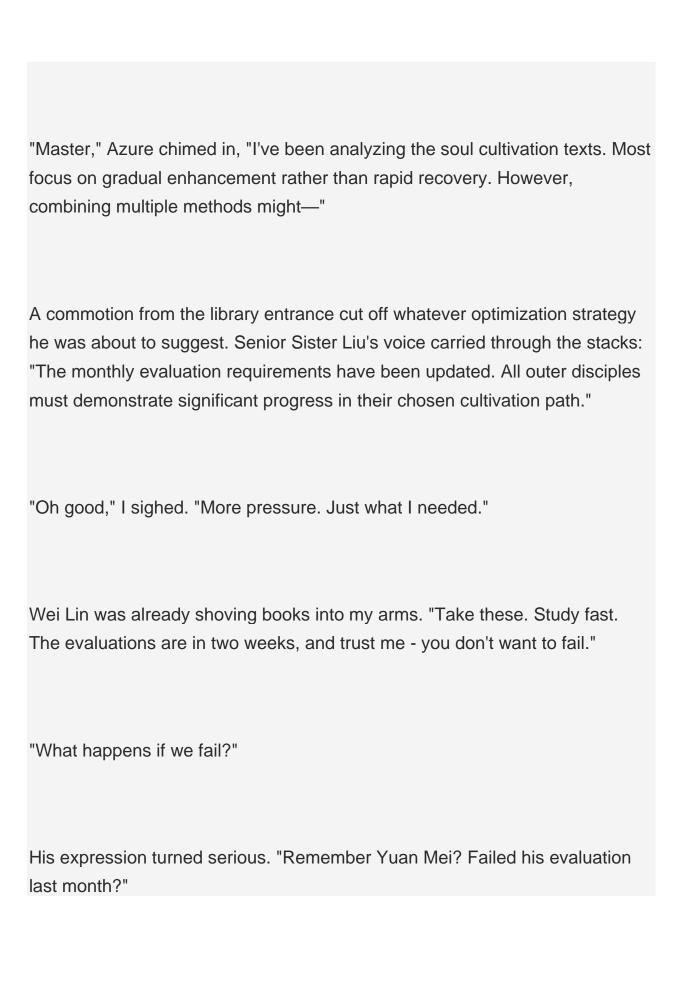
cultivation self-help books. "Top Ten Tricks to Breakthrough Success!"

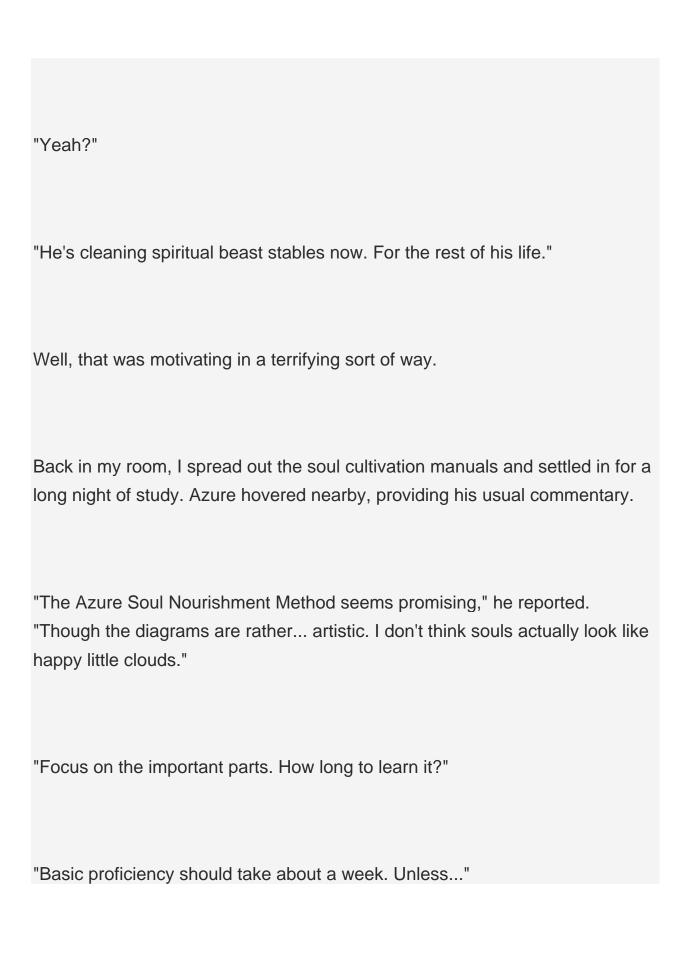
probably wasn't the profound knowledge the sect founders had in mind.

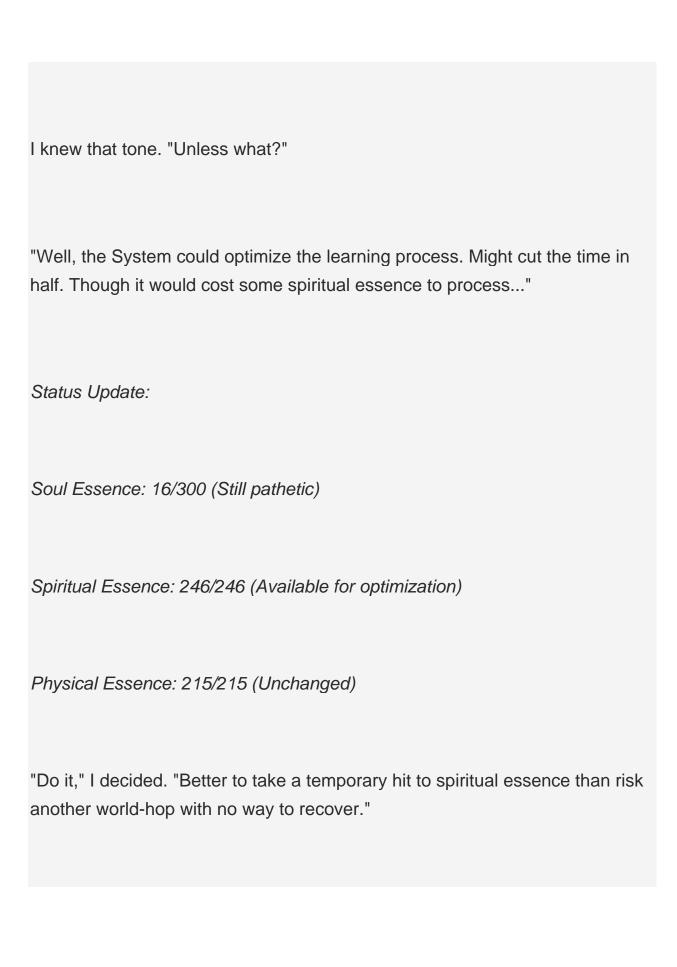


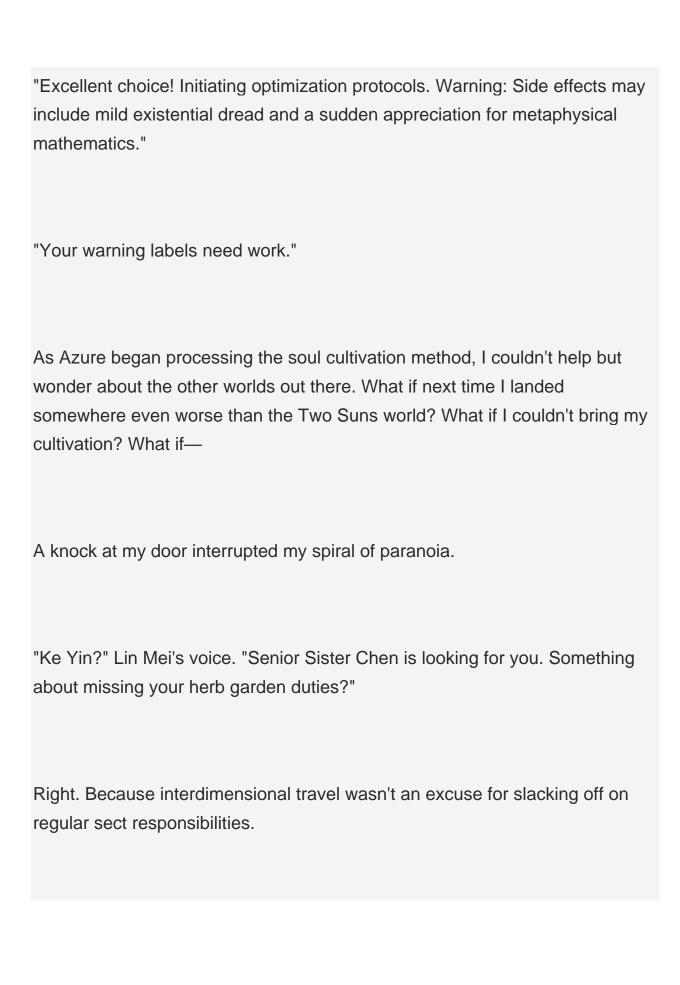
"Still focusing on basics!"
We spent the next few hours combing through the library's soul cultivation section. Most of the techniques were way beyond my level - things like "Grand Soul Dominion Method" and "Path of the Eternal Spirit" that probably required more cultivation progress than I'd make in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











"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.	