Currently I was sitting on my tiny bed, staring at my reflection in my little handheld mirror with utter confusion. A bit of disappointment, as well, obviously — part of me was definitely hoping that I'd look like any other girl. Unfortunately, though, I did not at all see whatever all those other people were seeing. I looked... well, like a ten year old with long hair and stuff.

Maybe my appearance was a *bit* androgynous? But it was probably already like that before I'd cultivated yin essence, right? So I couldn't really see whatever everyone else was seeing that made them see me as a girl now instead of a boy.

And, well, I *knew* that the cultivation hadn't had deeper effects. If it had, I would have... umm... *felt* them. I blushed a bit at the thought and my reflection blushed back.

Hmm. I stuck my tongue out.

Did I look like a girl? I really couldn't tell. Maybe it was because I had the long hair? But I'd had long hair for ages...

Agh! I don't get it!

Sighing, I put down the mirror and crossed my legs again. Whatever. I had some time left, so I might as well cultivate a bit more, this time using the main method.

I closed my eyes and slowed my breathing into a consistent rhythm, then began.

Yin Cultivation Method

1. Clear your mind.
2. Breathe. Slowly — in, out. In, out.
3. Feel within your aperture, feel the graceful, complex movements of your silver ocean of yin essence.
4. Gently guide the ocean, allow it to churn, allow the tides to rise and fall.
5. Guide the ocean in either of two ways, ideally keeping your aperture 50% filled with yin essence:
    a. Refine & condense yin essence — Allow the tides to crash together; yin essence will be refined and condensed into yin essence of a higher quality.
    b. Cultivate the yin energy from your own body — Allow the tides to impact against the walls of your aperture; your aperture and body will be refined, any yin energy within it slowly being replaced with energy of a higher quality.
6. Continue cultivating, but beware the limits of your aperture. If yellow essence ever appears within your silver ocean, you are tainting your aperture with yang energy — stop *immediately* and

follow the steps on page 13 under *Expelling Tainted Essence*. Afterwards, allow your aperture time to rest and heal.

The big difference between this cultivation method and the one for building yin essence was the fact that this one had me playing with my silver ocean, rather than just building it up.

I needed to feel the ocean first, feeling it moving or whatever. How was I supposed to go about that?

But... then, as I breathed, I realised that I could feel the ocean shifting. Just faintly, but enough that there were waves — no, ripples — on its surface. I realised quickly that the tides weren't due to something like a moon, they were created as I breathed, as I guided the essence to move around.

Once I could feel my ocean, cultivating in this way became easy. I could do all sorts of things with the essence in my aperture... I could rotate it around, faster and faster, I could lift it up and crash it down, and as the manual stated, I could allow it to impact the walls of my aperture.

But I could tell pretty much immediately that doing that wasn't producing more yin essence, like the manual said it would. Instead, the tangle of

scarlet vines that was impacted just... withered and dissolved in the essence, as though it were never there in the first place.

...And now my aperture was just slightly bigger and I didn't have enough essence to fill it to 50% anymore.

I stopped cultivating and opened my eyes. Ugh, what was with these stupid vines? Was it all like this? How much was here? If I kept chipping away at it, wouldn't my aperture keep growing?

This was all so confusing. Firstly, the fact that I had an aperture that no others had... at least, from what I'd heard. Like, maybe it could be that I had something special going on with my body — maybe something like what Elder Swan had been talking about back in the Spirit Cave, those exquisite physiques? That could explain why my aperture was different. On the other hand, she'd also said that the... something Cloud girl had an exquisite physique *because* she made it to the end of the Spirit Walk. Whereas I'd barely even started. So that didn't feel very realistic.

Secondly, though — and I was repeating myself here — were these vines even part of my aperture? I had to ask myself again — where had they come from? Were they because I was reincarnated? Were they something to do with the seal on my memories, if that was how it worked?

Gah! I still had no answers! I still had way too many questions and *no answers*. And now all the progress I'd made in the freezer was less useful, because in just a short while I could dig away a ton of new space in my

aperture and have the essence I'd collected suddenly become a very small percentage of that space.

On the other hand, having this stuff in my aperture meant that it was potentially a lot higher grade than it had seemed in the spirit cave. I wondered idly — how close would I be able to get to the spirit core after I cleared all of the scarlet thorny wall out? Would I have a more normal grade for my aperture? Maybe I could have an A-grade aperture like Morning Rain, or at the very least a B-grade.

I laid back against my pillow and breathed a long sigh. That really was the dream, wasn't it?

I was too nervous to head back to the dining hall until the next morning, where by that point I was *starving*. I'd gone about 48 hours without eating, after all, and, well, that was a long time. I was definitely feeling it.

Instead of eating, or doing really anything else, I'd cultivated that 50% of essence I had for hours, condensing it into yin essence that I could innately tell was a higher quality. Eventually, though, my aperture was getting low on yin essence — little tangles of vines were once again

sticking out of what was left of the ocean — so I'd had to stop and just hope that I'd made enough progress.

The next time I found some way to gain yin energy, though, I'd planned to alternate between cultivating it into yin essence and digging out my aperture further. Each little bit was increasing my cultivation aptitude, after all — it was a worthy cause!

When, that following morning, I walked into the dining hall for breakfast, there were a bunch of other young vi masters already there eating. That was a good sign! Did that mean the dumb people in the kitchen from the night before that had gotten themselves frozen were okay?

Unfortunately, it was impossible to tell, because the door was closed, the breakfast foods already out. Oh well. I'd figure it out at some point, I was sure.

And at that thought, I'd sat down to eat. Where the previous mornings I'd been in a rush to get to the library, this morning I wasn't rushing at all, and considering I hadn't had food for so long... breakfast that morning was *heavenly*. I... I honestly might have gone a little overboard with how much I ate, and for how long I was eating... but, well, I was hungry. I felt fine after eating, too. So it didn't really matter, right?

I didn't think so, at least.

My second stop that morning was the Sweeping Rain Academy plaza, where all of us were to gather again. Morning Rain had blinked again

when she'd seen me, kinda pouting. What did that expression even mean? I'd disappointed her, somehow?

As I tried to figure out what her expression had meant, other tier zero vi masters had wandered to the plaza as well. But eventually I ran out of thoughts on the topic, and became bored.

A few of the kids immediately began cultivating when they arrived — probably yang energy, since we were in the direct sunlight? They were brave, cultivating around other people with their apertures open and vulnerable. Not as if I had any vi plants to attack them with, though. None of us did, as far as I was aware.

In all honesty, I'd have probably been cultivating as well, but last night I'd done all the cultivating I could possibly do with the yin essence I had, and my wall of red vines didn't allow me to gain more from my own body. I was stuck with nothing to do!

Well... actually, I *could* start digging away some of those scarlet vines with what was left of my yin essence. That was safe, too, because it didn't require opening my aperture. Sure. Why not.

I closed my eyes and slowed my breathing, then went to work. It wasn't true cultivation, so it didn't require my full attention — honestly I had no idea how this could possibly go awry, it was such a simple action — so I kept part of my attention focused on my surroundings. If Morning Rain tried to do something, I'd... well, honestly, I didn't know what I'd do. But at least I'd have some warning.

True to my expectations, not a minute went by before I heard footsteps right near me. “He really thinks he’s safe to cultivate?” Morning Rain said, probably to one of her lackeys.

I sighed and opened my eyes. “No, I didn’t, Morning.”

She grimaced down at me. “Did you get a new method? You were gonna look so...”

“Cute?” the boy from last night finished her sentence for her.

She glared at him for a moment before shaking her head and turning back to me. “No... I was going to say he was going to look so... stupid, I guess.” She pouted.

“I didn’t,” I said, indignantly.

“Really?” she covered her mouth with her hand. “Wait, why don’t you look all... well, like you did yesterday?”

I shrugged. It wasn’t like I even knew how I’d looked any different... though it was a little depressing that whatever that was had gone away. If only I could cultivate in that freezer every day... you know, without freezing the entire mortal population of the Village of Rain.

She opened her mouth, probably to say something else rude, but I didn’t let her. “So how’s that Bright Moon Cultivation Method... or whatever... working out for you? You know, now that I’ve got the better one.” Ha! How’s that, Morning? Dang, I impressed myself there.

My sister sputtered for a moment, shaking her head. "It's the *Silent* Moon Cultivation Method, and *Papa said* that that it was the best!"

I shrugged again. "I mean... he did also say that I was going to be the next Village Chief, but he was wrong there, too, apparently."

She sputtered again, then pouted and stomped off. "I... ugh! I hate you!"

The lackeys all stared at me for a minute, their eyes wide, as if they couldn't believe that I'd made their fearless leader retreat. I shrugged a third time. For someone so quick to be malicious towards me, she really couldn't take much of it back, could she?

As the lackeys ran back over to Morning Rain, who was sitting angrily in wait for the assembly, the Elders finally began to show up, one by one. Elder Flame, Elder Swan, Elder Thunder, Elder Pond, and a few other lesser Elders. Most of these Elders weren't associated with the Sweeping Rain Academy, either — it seemed like most of the entire Village's Elders were here today. That made sense, too, since this was the day when they found promising disciples.

Also arriving — usually at a slower pace — were a lot of teachers. One only became an Elder at tier three, after all, and there were teachers at the academy that were only at tier two. In fact, most of the teachers I would have for the first few years were probably gonna still be at tier two. The higher you got in your cultivation, after all, the easier it was for it to stall — for every vi master of a high tier were ten more in the tier below.

Elder Moon wasn't here, I realised after a moment. Huh. Guess she had better things to do than choose a disciple? Or maybe she didn't want one? Wait, she'd muttered about reentering seclusion yesterday, hadn't she?

"Young vi masters!" Elder Flame called out, activating a rather flashy fire path vi plant to get our attention. Everyone quieted down, students, teachers, and other Elders alike. I was included in that number, quickly paying more attention to the stage — the assembly was about to begin!