

Chapter 303: Prodigy

“... Why?” Mercury asked.

What had he done to make a star jealous? Actually, no, there was a pretty solid answer to that, wasn't there. His whole suite of powers was kind of stella-themed. One of his names was literally <Starlight>, so. That sorta explained that. Outside of the whole 'The-sun-has-a-consciousness' thing. That one was still a bit of a mystery to him.

Elder Yue nodded slowly. “Yes, well, the world runs on many rules. And the heavens can be ruthless. There seems to be some connection there - the will of the heavens, the way the sun seems to be eroding you away. It has similar effects to a heavenly tribulation, and yet seems very narrowly focused on you.

“It looks to me like someone up in the heavens is taking issue with you, and has some measure of control over light and heat. Practicing the Skyflame Artes may protect you from that, by tempering your channels, and allowing you to outpace the damage with your resistance.”

Softly, Mercury nodded. If this truly was some kind of targeted attack, then building more of a resistance sounded fine to him. He had only just gotten started on his cultivation journey, after all. The Gilded-Realm was strong by the measures of mortals or average cultivators, but Mercury, these days, was a prodigy beyond prodigies.

He wanted to go a little bit further, and a little bit wider. The Skyflame Artes seemed a good place to start that process. He looked upon the scrolls laid out in front of him again, then nodded once more. “But it's not a permanent solution, is it?” he asked.

At that, the older woman shook her head, wringing her hands slightly. “It is not. Our artes teach humility, and that is perhaps the quality most useful to you. I believe the heavens likely want you to be... more subservient.”

Instantly, there was a small shiver travelling up Mercury's back. “Subservient?” he asked, his voice taking on an edged quality.

The elder nodded once, not needing to reply. Her eyes were trained on his veil, seeing the faint purple of his irises beneath it. Mercury grit his teeth. His jaw set with force. Slowly, he breathed in, then out.

“Not happening,” he said.

It was a final decree, a simple statement of defiance. Mercury was a lot of things. He took pride, these days, in being a kind, helpful, even patient person. He forgave a lot of things, and let people go who probably didn’t deserve it. He was, by all means, a cat of second chances.

But he was not someone who kneeled.

Anyone who demanded that of him instantly became someone unworthy of respect. It was a request he found so vehemently against his nature that he bristled at the very thought. Even as he spoke the words, the curse on him intensified. The sunlight pierced his skin, driving deep needles of pain into the flesh underneath.

He ignored all that wholesale. Right now, he was fighting his anger more than the pain. It was the bubbling rage that he always felt when people deigned to interfere with his personhood. The kind of anger he got when people tried to pet him, tried to reduce him to a mere beast.

Yes, he was a mopaaw. Yes, he was fluffy and probably cute in some ways, and looked friendly. But he was very, very protective of himself. Of his own personal space, of who got to hug or touch him, of who he showed respect to.

That was what it came down to. Respect. It needed to be earned, not demanded. Mercury respected Zyl, for example. The dragon was powerful, kindhearted, and consistently tried to do right by himself and others. He never asked for too much, he gave as much as he could. That deserved respect.

Demanding Mercury go to his knees or be struck down with heat and light? Okay. Yeah, no, he’d rather be burnt to a crisp than kneel to the undeserving.

“You seem... angry,” elder Yue said, looking at Mercury with worry, and maybe a bit of pity.

The mopaaw nodded. “I *am* angry,” he said. His shadow flickered in the sunlight. “There is not an ounce of patience in my soul for anyone or anything who would see me reduced to a mere tool to further their arrogance.”

At that the older woman’s features fell into a slight grimace. Her nod came slow and unsure, her eyes darting to the side. “I see. In that case, we can do our best to teach you resilience.”

All at once, Mercury retracted his anger. <Babbling Brook> washed it away, and returned him to clarity. He took a long, steadying breath, then cupped his hands and bowed. A little deeper than he needed to. "Thank you, elder Yue," he said, "and my apologies for my outburst. That was unbecoming. I assure you that neither you nor your monastery have drawn any of my ire."

Even with his head tilted downwards, veil pooling in his lap, he could feel how the tension left the old woman's shoulders. To some distant degree, she must have perceived Mercury as a threat, which was shameful. He felt guilt at that. Making people feel afraid of him, especially when they had done nothing wrong, was something he was loath to do.

"Apologies accepted, esteemed sorcerer," the older woman said, easily waving him off. She did, however, call him a sorcerer. Fundamentally, to her, he was not a cultivator quite yet. That was fine, though. He was just in the Gilded-Realm, after all.

It meant he was strong compared to the average apprentice. Usually, apprentices sat at Rusted, deacons or similar at Reforged. Gilded marked the transition from the have-nots to the haves. It was the domain of people beginning to be experts.

After it came Golden-Core, and beyond that Bladesoul. That was what Mercury knew. But, by now, he thought that the colours and implements didn't matter as much. One of the scrolls in front of him, after all, listed a realm called *Flamesoul*, which he imagined to be a parallel to Bladesoul, except focused on a different element.

He sighed softly, then looked at elder Yue. "What would you recommend as my next steps?" he asked. "I have reached the Gilded-Realm and solidified my reality. What should I move onto?"

"The basics," Yue Mei said with a smile. The kind that sent faint wrinkles across her aged face, the kind that she must give whenever an apprentice asked questions about a subject she clearly cared for. "You have cultivated a mess of techniques, and each of them has impacted you. Somehow, you haven't completely mangled your energy body, which speaks to your adaptability. You've taken the techniques and made them your own. But your foundation is still somewhat unsteady. So practice the basics."

Mercury tilted his head. "What would the basics be?" he asked.

She pushed a Crude technique scroll at him. Crude meaning that it was an entirely simple technique. It was clumsy compared to even a Polished level technique, not to mention

comparing it to something of the Artful, Grand or Heavenly-ranks. A pathetic thing that was meant for children to learn how to direct qi.

And yet, he picked it up gingerly. His eyes slowly drifted over the words and forms on the page, his mind working to comprehend them. Mercury nodded, as he saw the patterns. The way it summoned up fire from qi, forming the flames from that internal energy. Thin streamers of it would be propelled from the knuckles on a punch.

“It’s the first form of the Skyflame Artes, as simple as it gets. Flaming punch.” She gestured at the wide open garden with a smile. “Go ahead. Practice. Do a few hundred repetitions. It’ll build character.”

Mercury, for a breath, considered laughing. A few hundred repetitions to build character... that’s what Yasashiku had him do with nails. There was a lot of value in repetition for practice. Doing something until one was truly good at it.

But he didn’t need repetition for something like this. Perhaps, well, he *could* use it. There was no harm in it, of course. But he would also give it his best shot on his first attempt. Cultivating and qi was much closer to his set of specialties than blacksmithing had been when he started.

With every bit of skill and Skill Mercury acquired, he learnt faster. He had a wider knowledge-base to build on, after all, and without the degradation of learning and memory that usually came with age, it was all additive to him.

All of that is to say, the fire came easy to him.

Mercury took the stance. His knees bent faintly, one foot a little further back. He followed the breathing patterns, in through the nose, out through the mouth. His qi went from wisps in his body to a circulated mass of energy.

One by one, he felt his joints. Went through the motion in his head. Then, pushed.

His lead foot pushed, took his weight. His back foot pivoted, hip rotating, and he extended his hand. One fist shot forward with brutal speed, hissing through the air. Qi swirled in his meridians in a blazing pattern, feeling like gasoline in his veins, igniting before it even touched his knuckles.

Liquid fire roared out of the punch, a thin, pressurised line of flame lancing from his fist. A blink later, still hanging in the air, it exploded.

Oranges and red flickered to life. The short, sturdy grass underneath Mercury's feet singed. His veil danced in the wind and heat, and the lights reflected in elder Yue's wide eyes. Mercury didn't even get a Skill for it, since it was already covered by his current capabilities.

An application of <Internal Energy>, <Magic> and <Origin Qi>. That's all. He simply twisted the power from his dantian into shape. A simple but effective application, even if it wasn't too sophisticated. He didn't have to impress his will on the world, didn't have to put in any effort to weave complex patterns.

Which was fine. This was, after all, a technique for beginners. And he was in the Gilded-Realm. His control over qi was simply far higher than that of any novice, his mind powerful enough to handle patterns hundreds of times more complicated. This was like when Irrithuriel had taught him a basic ice spell - except that he already knew all the conversion formulas.

He'd learnt it monstrously fast back then. Now, he learnt it even faster. His affinity with fire was strong, too, like most magical elements these days. Mercury had built himself a foundation, and it was bearing fruit. With a small smile, he looked at the elder. "Will this be sufficient?" he asked simply.

For a moment she looked at him, mouth hanging slightly open. Then, she forced it closed, swallowed once, then nodded. "You have surprised me once again, apprentice Mercury," she said. "I was told you were a quick study, but hearing it and seeing it certainly are somewhat different. Yes, I believe you have shown adequate mastery of the flaming punch. Your flows are somewhat turbulent, but you did already compress it, just by the natural density of your energy, which is impressive."

Nodding along with what she said, Mercury smiled. When she taught, or talked about techniques, a lot of the wariness and fear she usually displayed around him faded almost entirely. Which he could appreciate. Mercury wasn't someone who enjoyed being feared, after all.

"I suppose I will skip ahead in some lectures then..." the woman paused, shaking her head with a faint smile. "Prodigies. Apologies, we don't get too many true prodigies these days. Most of our students are the diligent kind that grows over long stretches of involved effort. I may be somewhat rusty at teaching one like you. But I believe the next technique you may be interested in would be flame body Artes."

Mercury tilted his head. "Flame body?"

"A moment," elder Yue said, rising to her feet and brushing her robe. She sent for an attendant to fetch her the technique from the archives, having not thought she would need it today. Once the scroll was in her hands, she gave it to Mercury. Then, almost as an afterthought, she added, "ah, please do not spread the technique recklessly. It is meant to be something of a secret."

Raising an eyebrow, Mercury read, eyes darting across the text. "A secret? Any punishment for leaking it?"

Elder Yue gave a conflicted smile, wringing her hands slightly. "We would threaten to excommunicate or kill you, but..."

"I see the issue," Mercury said with a snicker. They couldn't kill him. Instead, they made a request of him not to share, and since he was a very, very polite mopaaw, he was even inclined to listen to them. Which was good, because he really didn't need that sort of trouble with a sect that seemed like it might counter his boyfriend.

The flame body Artes was a supplementary set of techniques, really, rather than a true member of the technique. It was a passive effect that could be achieved by simply practicing fire-aspected techniques often enough, but Mercury would not be doing that. Instead, he would simply focus on learning the arte, and imbuing his body, even if it wasn't numbered.

Amusingly, its grade was deceptively low. It was a Polished-Rank technique. Far more complex than the Crude punch he had just learnt, but still low. And, indeed, it lacked complexity, but it used a few interesting trickly, and built a passive foundation.

In simple words, the flame body Arte asked that Mercury rearrange his meridians slightly, in order to better align them with cosmic energies. Reducing it down further, he was making himself into a living, proper conduit of fire. His meridians would absorb any part of outside attacks, and he could even metabolize heat somewhat.

But it was, still, just a technique. It required his qi to flow, so he was encouraged to passively cycle it through his meridians. That was also the way to realign them. Slowly pushing them by applying pressure with the flowing qi - like Mercury had done all the way back when he grew his mana veins.

These days, it was much simpler. He <Unravelled> his own network of meridians, and rewrote their <Truth>. Within five minutes, he had completed the first step of the technique, the setup. Now he just needed to actively cycle in specific patterns, introducing stutters to pick up and move along energy.

In a way, it was like preparing tiny packets of qi, ready to eat the energy in the atmosphere, or foreign powers coursing through his body. A little bit like an immune system for fire and heat. In fact...

Those little packets were a little crude, weren't they? Mercury already knew how to absorb energy quite well. Pali was a specialist in it, after all, so he had been taught by the best. What if he applied some of the principles of energy absorption to those little packets of qi, restructured their threading, and then-

[<Mind over Matter> has levelled up! <Mind over Matter lv. 1 -> 2>]

The heat burning his skin *rapidly* dropped.

It didn't disappear, of course. But it went from cooking him and beginning to sear his muscles to sunburn-at-the-beach territory. Mercury's meridians carried the leftover energy and radiation, neutralizing it and allowing him to absorb it harmlessly.

He had also accidentally improved the technique from Polished to Artful. Whoops. Elder Yue stared at him. Mercury gave an awkward smile, hidden behind the veil that was finally doing a good job keeping him safe from the heat again. Letting <Babbling Brook> taper off slightly felt like laying down after a long walk.

Not like he needed it, of course. The Skill could have kept going for months, years even. It'd probably have just outgrown its own overuse. And yet, lowering the intensity felt like a relief. Mercury took a deep breath he hadn't known he was holding in. "That does help," he said.

Elder Yue stared at him. For a long moment she just sat and stared. Then, she brought up a hand, pinched the bridge of her nose and let out a huff of air. A few moments later she laughed. "I'm, frankly, jealous. Learning the flame body Arte took me two seasons. Two seasons! And you *improve it* - don't think I didn't catch that! - in a few minutes. I see why Keiko took you on now."

Mercury smiled faintly. Then, he stretched, messed up the circulation in his meridians for a moment, and a gout of fire spewed from his shoulder. He smacked it like one might a mosquito, plugging the hole. His body regenerated a moment later, and he dedicated a pair of ystirs to monitor the flow.

"Apologies," Mercury said, once more lazily enjoying the sunlight, stretching his arms out. "Meditating makes me a little stiff."

The old woman laughed again, then nodded along. "Right, stiff, yes. Me too. However, I will not explode because of it, thank you. I couldn't grow my shoulder back as fast as you did."

"It was barely an explosion," Mercury deflected.

Yue Mei raised an eyebrow. "Would it have ripped my arm off?"

"Well, yes--"

"There you have it," she said with a haughty huff, then turned on her heel. "I'm not teaching you anything else today."

Mercury creased his forehead at that. "What. Why?" he asked.

She didn't even glance back at him, but her smugness was clear. "Because you're advancing too fast and I can't handle any more miracles today. Tomorrow, we'll re-temper your foundations. Meet me at dawn. The time matters."

With his shoulders slumping, Mercury sighed. "Yes, ma'am," he said dutifully, then smiled. He straightened, then looked at the sky, directly into the sun. It burnt his eyes, but only a little bit. The brightness itself was no longer enough to harm him, so he looked at it for a long while.

Then, he whispered. "Hey. I'm gonna have to ask you to leave me alone, or I'll climb up there and kick your butt," he said. It felt a little silly to be talking to a star, of course, but since the speed at which his skin turned to ash increased once he threatened it, he lost a lot of that notion.

Mercury considered his job done, though. He'd extended the warning, the olive branch. Now? He might as well enjoy the rest of the day. Where was Zyl, anyways?

- - -

The dragon sat under the shade of a tree. One of the few trees around, in fact. It was... more of a tall shrub, really, with more stretchy fibers composing the bark and wood. A little like a palm tree. But its large, wide leaves did provide a lot of shade, even if the tree drooped and curled low to the ground.

"Whatcha doing?" Mercury asked, poking his head into the dragon's field of view.

"Drawing," Zyl replied, promptly ignoring the cat, even as a smile played at his lips.

“Whatcha drawin’?” Mercury asked helpfully, staring into the dragon’s eyes, moving closer to cover up even more of his field of view.

“The canyon.”

“Mmmh,” Mercury nodded seriously, then sat down next to the dragon, leaning against him.

“What’s so special about the canyon?”

Zyl smiled. “Oh? Do things need to be special for me to draw ‘em?”

“Not really.” Mercury shrugged, then stared into the distance. “But you have an eye for beauty. So tell me why it’s beautiful.”

At that, the dragon broke out into a snicker, huffing faintly. “Sasasa. You’re adorable. Alright, I’ll bite,” he said. “I like the walls of the canyon. They frame the distance nicely. The rock formations, the overhangs, the few bits of shrubbery making their life here despite the hostile environment. Thriving in adversity. The buildings built into the walls.”

“Mhm, mhm!” Mercury nodded along.

“I think the way this place cuts through the landscape, the way the shadows fall when the sun is rising or falling creates nice contrast. I can play with swathes of cascading shadows. So that’s what I’ve been doing.”

Mercury smiled. The mopaaw leaned over slowly, resting his head between Zyl’s neck and shoulder. “Sounds pretty.”

“I need some pretty things to look at.”

“Are you calling me ugly?” Mercury asked, faking offense.

Zyl snickered. “You’re more the handsome type.”

“Sure thing, pretty boy,” Mercury said. They both laughed. Then slowly went quiet. The moment lasted a long second.

Just the two of them, silence hanging in the air. Zyl’s pencil rhythmically scratched across the paper, creating shapes. Mercury watched for a little while. A minute, then five. Then, he dug his fingers into the tree.

Pulling out a chunk of wood, he mended it afterwards, the fibers smoothly regrowing. Then, with <Magic>, which had assimilated <Grass>, he made the piece he'd picked out denser and more rigid. A large piece of wood that he could whittle down and reshape as needed.

Smiling faintly, he manifested a knife from mana, weaving the solid material into a sharp blade. And he cut, sitting in the sunlight.

He might slowly be burning alive, but Mercury would not have traded that afternoon away for the whole world.