

Chapter 275: Merciful

Min sprinted down the stairs. His footsteps, more than anything, belied his feeling of terror. With painfully swift motions, he tore through the distance, panickedly knocking at the door to Mercury's room. "Esteemed saviour," he pleaded at the wooden slate, "please, come out. There is someone here to see you, there is-"

He paused, when the door swung open outside, and scrolls and books poured out like spilling water. Min's jaw fell as he beheld the insides of the chamber, which had so swiftly turned into something more *library* than living space. For a long, passing moment, he just stared.

"What is it?" Mercury asked, rubbing his eyes.

"The- the Lilac Skies' sect master is here," Min admitted quietly. "He suspects you to have stolen from their library, esteemed saviour." The implications were left unsaid as Min's eyes lingered on the books that so easily spilled out of the room.

At the confession, Mercury gave a hum, his eyes glinting. "Hmmm, does he now?" he asked, scratching his beard. "Well, then I better go and have a conversation with him." A soft sigh left his lips, and he patted Min's shoulder. "Good man," he said. "Thank you for calling me."

And with that, he crossed his arms behind his back and walked up the stairs, no real hurry to his motions. A dozen seconds later, a very sleepy Zyl yawned a plume of fire as he walked out, glancing at Min. "Oh, uh," he said hastily. "You... didn't see that." Then he yawned again, rubbing his eyes, and slouched upstairs.

Min was terrified, and yet, those two monsters stood entirely unfazed. "What in the nine realms..." he whispered, staring after them, before blinking and remembering himself. Instantly, he sprinted upwards, to see what was happening.

Outside, the sect leader was standing, wearing a scowl so deep it looked forged from 1000 year cold steel. The lines had worn into his aging face like they lived there, and Min instantly knew he was not a man who smiled often. Right now, that furious, unending scowl, was directed right at Mercury, as an Elder pointed him out in the crowd.

For himself, Mercury was ordering a bit of breakfast for himself and Zyl from the innkeep with a gentle smile, before finally heading towards the aggravated sect. There were elders

gathered with core disciples, some wearing confusion, but most working hard to maintain a unified look of disgust and dislike.

“You,” the sect leader’s voice was a thunderclap into the silence of the inn. His raven hair fluttered in the air as killing intent flowed from him like an unending tsunami, making his robes flutter in the wind. “Are you the blacksmith that has taken up residence here, recently?”

Nodding quietly, Mercury held a hand in front of his mouth as he yawned. “Haaaah- yeah. Yeah, that’s me. What’s up?”

The sect leader’s eye twitched. The bloodlust coming from him redoubled, making Min step back. Standing too close made him want to spit blood, the cultivator’s fury far too much for him to withstand. “You have stolen from our sect.”

“No I didn’t,” Mercury replied.

More anger. “You deny this?! Wretch, we will forgive you peacefully if you return what you took, kowtow fifty times, and work for us for a decade,” he said with a sneer. “People like you need to know where they stand in this world. You have your place, and we have ours,” he rumbled, placing his hand on the hilt of his sword.

The weapon resonated with his bloodlust, making Min step back yet again. The air felt charged like thunder, and Mercury smiled gently. “I extorted you,” he said quietly. “That’s not stealing. You crossed my bottom line, and so I took things in return.”

“You should know not to cross this line,” the sect leader hissed quietly, veins painting a picture of tempered fury on his forehead. The first inch of steel left its sheathe.

“Should I?” Mercury asked with a smile, tilting his head. “Or what? Will you cut my head off?” he waved his hand - the one he’d *lost* and just placed back on his stump like nothing happened. “Would that make you feel better?”

At that, the sect leader’s anger roiled. “Kowtow!” he demanded.

But Mercury just shook his head. “No,” he said quietly, like a warm summer breeze. “I’m afraid I won’t. I don’t bow.”

And that was the final straw. “Let everyone know,” the sect leader said with fury, “that the Lilac Skies’ sect is reasonable. We were willing to forgive this grudge if proper reparations

were paid. Now, we will kill this man's family for three generations. This is pride's folly. You have eyes but could not see the sky, so you must pay."

He drew his blade, and all that cold, roiling fury condensed alongside its edge. The sect leader's movement was swift, a blur to everyone's mortal eyes. The sword whipped out in a breath so quick it split the air with a gentle vision, and then a small thundercrack rumbled as the world remembered to react.

Already, the sect leader had sheathed his sword again, looking at the headless corpse still standing there with disdain. He looked around the room, eyes landing on Min. "Merchant!" he demanded, stepping inside the inn. "You are an associate. You must die, too."

Instantly, sweat roiled down Min's back. The sect leader had cut down his saviour so effortlessly. The merchant stumbled back, fear filling his veins as he scrambled to escape just a little further. But the old monster would not let up. Bloodstained blade in hand, he moved another step - then stopped.

There was a hand on his shoulder.

The headless corpse's hand.

For a moment, the entire room held its breath. Slowly, almost gently, the corpse held the sect master in place. His head turned to stare at it with fury, but the expression froze on his face. Instead, slowly, his lips parted in surprise as he stared at the body that held him.

And then, the corpse held up a finger, as if bidding him to wait. With gentle, careful movements, it walked over to its removed head, dusted off the wound - from which not a drop of blood had leaked, and then... pressed it back on, against the stump of its neck.

[<Assimilate> has levelled up! <Assimilate lv. 1 -> 2>]

The skin sealed shut, seared by a swift lick of fire across the wound. There was no scar, no sign that there had ever been an injury. Mercury just smiled as if nothing had ever happened. "You've claimed my head, sect master," he said, with a saccharine smile into the dreadful silence that hung heavy over the inn. "Are you happy now?"

"Wh-what?!" the old man gasped, drawing and raising his blade, holding it between them like a shield. "What are you?! A flesh-puppet? Or is that the legendary phoenixfire resurrection art?! Explain yourse-"

“Shhh,” Mercury said, as a crown appeared above his head. A silver circled, woven from elegant lines that curled around him, with a gem of roiling mercury. Instantly, silence descended on the room, pressing down on everyone inside. “Listen for a moment, please,” he asked, his voice calm.

“See, everyone has a bottom line, sect leader,” Mercury said, circling the poor man like a tiger stalking its prey. “I am a patient man. No flesh puppet, no monster. Just a man, with a tough body. Tough to kill. I am no cultist. I don’t drain anyone for this. I have fought long and hard to live as I do. Do *not* insult me for this,” he said, the threat hanging in the air.

“I let one of yours cut off my hand. I retaliated for an attempt to use my friends to get at me. Twice now, twice you’ve tried to force me into working for you.” His fingers reached out, caressing the edge of the sect leader’s blade. The steel rang with a beautiful sound as Mercury’s skin parted before its exquisite edge, coated in intent.

“And I’ve been patient, so very patient. They warned you, did they not? The spirits.” The sect leader’s mouth moved, but no sound left it. No noise split the oppressive silence, as it dug into everyone’s bones. “I assure you that I do not enjoy hurting people. I let you take my head. You could have left after that, and we would have had no trouble. But you tried to go further. To hurt someone who has nothing to do with this, for the crime of knowing me.”

There was a long quiet moment, as Mercury drew in another breath. “That, I cannot just let go.” His hand wrapped around the sect master’s blade. His skin split open from the steel. It was so supernaturally sharp, it would cut anything that even touched it, and yet, the strange cultivator held on. Metal flowed forward, dark and grim, flowing over his skin.

“Now, let me tell you what will happen. You’re going to let this go. I’ll take your sword. I’ll take copies of your sect’s innermost secrets as I peruse its vaults. And then, you’ll cut your hair for me. Go bald for a little while.” He drew a deep, long breath. “Those are my conditions. Speak.”

The silence vanished. As quickly as it came, the hanging emptiness in the air disappeared. Mercury’s hand was still on the sect master’s blade, even as the other man stared in wide-eyed disbelief. There was panic and fury mixing on his face. But already, it was clear he was not yet done. The sect master was not used to being denied, and so, he refused to let it happen here.

Instead of giving an answer, he simply bellowed. “**Ancestor!!**” he rumbled, shaking the ground with his yell. Somewhere deep down in the earth, a timeless seal cracked, and a

jade-coffin slid open. Paper talismans fell to the ground, as the old monster inside it let out a groan, rolling her shoulders.

A moment later, she frowned, and the air shuddered.

One blink to another, a woman stood next to Mercury. She had grey-white hair, long enough to reach her ankles, neatly braided. Her robes were immaculate, though they hung a little around her too-thin frame. Age had won away at the fullness of her cheeks, leaving her looking skeletal, ragged.

Still, despite that, the power that poured from her was unimaginable. It was commanding. All-consuming. The kind that made Min want to spit blood and die just from the pressure she exuded. It was a violent thing that spoke of dozens of years of war. She regarded Mercury quietly, calmly, and sighed.

"You awaken me for this, sect leader?" she asked quietly, her voice brittle like flaking bone.

Instantly, the man fell on his knees. "Please, ancestor!" he begged. "This man has been stealing from our sect, he deserves to die!"

Her eyes, cold and aloof, turned to Mercury. Who just tilted his head a little. "That's just categorically untrue," he said calmly. The ancestor narrowed her eyes at him.

"My name is Lilac Irene, founder of the Lilac Skies sect." Her words came out slowly, like flowing honey, as she drew a blade and pointed it at Mercury's chest. Which was a bit awkward, with his hand still wrapped around the sect leader's blade. "Who are you?"

Mercury tilted his head further. "You ask questions," he noted, then nodded. "Very well. I am Mercury. I brought my companions to this city to find them work. Your sect tried to cause a scene with them in order to recruit me for work, and I didn't appreciate that. So, I took some copies of your library's scrolls. All of them."

"That is a wealth of knowledge you have taken," Lilac said. "Do you truly believe it to be justified?"

"I believe it to be generous," Mercury replied simply, waving his free hand. Her blade pressed into him further, its tip pricking his skin. "No blood other than mine was shed. The same rings true here. I have not hurt anyone here." His eyes bored into her. "Yet."

At that, Lilac barked out a laugh. “Hah! Think you have bite?” she asked, pressing further. Her sword dug into his chest, splitting it open beneath the cloud-white robes he wore. Almost lazily, the ancestor stepped forward, skewering Mercury.

“Are you done yet?” he asked calmly, when the tip of the sword protruded from his back.

Apparently, that was finally something Lilac didn’t expect. Her eyes widened, then narrowed with wariness. “What the...” she muttered, then stepped back, withdrawing her blade. Mercury’s wounds crawled shut with stored flesh being deposited where it was needed. “You use techniques of the cults-”

“No, I don’t,” Mercury said with a sigh. “I’m not even from here, lady. I don’t know what a cult is. But my patience is beginning to wear thin. Call your sect off.”

She frowned at the demand. “Watch your tone, boy. I have lived a hundred years before you saw your first sunrise. My blade has been sharpened to transcendence when you were but a babe. If you step out of line, I will carve you up.”

The words weren’t even intended as a threat, just a simple statement of truth... but that didn’t make them any less funny. Mercury snickered for a moment, then shook his head. “Always the same,” he said quietly, almost sadly. “Always the same.” He held out his hand. “Give me your sword, too.”

At that, anger clouded her features, storm clouds gathering in her vision. “What?” she spat, furiously. “Do not make *demands* of me, boy.”

“All this posturing,” Mercury said, slouching. “And for what?” he whispered. “For what...” Then, with a long sigh, he straightened his back, put on a thin smile, and nodded. “Zyl, you can beat her up now.”

“Oh good,” the dragon said with a wicked grin. “I thought you’d never ask.”

That was the cue the mortals took to begin running - but there was no need to. When the words left Mercury’s mouth, and ancestor Lilac began to swing her blade, something very simple happened.

<Astral Ascent>. <Dream Manifestation>.

One moment, they stood in an inn, crowded with bystanders. The next, they were on a vast, grassy plain, far removed from anything. In the distance, there were wrought iron lanterns,

and thin streams. A fountain, a citadel, a castle, and distant mountains. A moment passed as ancestor Lilac blinked, and then, her vision turned red.

Mercury still held onto the sect leader's sword when fire bloomed in front of him. "Juno, could you take care of the rest of the sect?" he asked, quietly.

"Yes, my liege," the wolf replied swiftly, her voice but a whisper from his shadow. A moment later, a blob of darkness disconnected from him, slithered across the ground, and wrapped around the elders' and disciples. The darkness shifted to restrain them, bind their limbs as they were surprised, and soon, grassy tendrils and wisps of mist joined the binding shades.

They fought, of course. Qi burned, swords flashed, but Juno danced through them like a ghost. Her body turned to mist when it needed to, and her bites delivered ice, freezing entire limbs anytime she did get someone.

Flickering flames painted Mercury's face in light and shadow as he looked at the sect leader. The older man still scowled, now rising to his feet again, pulling on his sword. But it didn't move.

He blinked for a moment, staring into the distance, where his ancestor was brutally battling with Zyl, flames spilling from his fists as they crashed into her mighty sword, the two of them darting through the sky, each clash a thunderclap. "Wretch. Once my ancestor finishes off your friend-"

"Boyfriend," Mercury corrected gently.

"Fine, your boyfriend, she will have your head next," the old man snarled.

Mercury nodded solemnly. "Because that went so well for you, right?" Stygian metal crawled from his hand to the blade, ensnaring it further. Tendrils of deepest darkness wrapped around it, metal snaking over metal.

The sect leader stared at the sight, and pulled. He tried, and, Mercury admitted, it was a good attempt. He even wrapped his intent around the blade again, giving it an aura. A feat of mastery over the blade that Mercury had yet to achieve.

Nodding with respect, the mopaaw still held on, the Dream of Starvation slowly crawling over the blade. When the tendrils of darkness finally approached the sect leader's hand, he grit his teeth and let go, stumbling backwards. "You worthless shitstain," he snarled. "I will kill you seven times over for your sins."

“Sir I’ve literally just been standing here,” Mercury said with an awkward expression. But it fell on deaf ears. Already, the sect leader was shaping another blade from intent and Qi, air and willpower twisting together to create a wonderful mirage of a sword. Darkness unveiled his original blade.

Well forged and runed, it was now held lazily in Mercury’s hand. Amusingly, it was his first time actually holding a sword. How strange it was, to feel so human again. He swung the length of metal once, twice, a bit awkwardly, then smiled. “Y’know, I see how people get used to this.”

A blink later, the sect leader was in front of him. A gust of wind had carried him, driven by a technique that blended magic and martial arts. The ground cratered where he’d stood before, and the magic-woven blade cut towards Mercury’s shoulder, aiming to bisect him.

Stygian metal crawled across his skin, stopping the blow before it ever grazed his skin. If he’d been human, he might have bruised from it, but he wasn’t. The sect leader just stared, eyes widening as he blurred, moving into other forms. Striking at Mercury’s shape.

But when he parted the Storm’s Raiment, he found that Mercury had already shifted. The robes spread wide, blurring his shape. Mercury cast his true location under <Veil>, making it harder to find him.

[<Veil> has levelled up! <Veil lv. 7 -> 8>]

<Combat Sense> warned him of blows before they found him, and <Grain of Infinity> fed the former with as much power as it needed. Sighing lazily, Mercury flowed around the man’s attacks. Eventually, he even followed the sensation, and raised his own sword to block an attack.

His strength was lower than that of the sect leader - but his endurance was higher. Braced by the Dream of Starvation and the structure of his bones, it was more than possible for him to block any blows, simply casting all that effort into nothing.

The two were locked in a dance, as Mercury watched. And learned.

“See,” the mopaaw said slowly. “What I’m doing right now is stealing.”

That only aggravated the sect leader further, and the man let out a roar. Horrid winds tore at Mercury, but then he looked at them and smiled. “Be silent,” he beckoned the air - and the

air fell still. All the Qi that powered it turned into nothing but a dull hum in the background, blades settling to become nothing more than air.

Grimacing, the sect leader moved again, when fire plumed in the distance. Heat and light washed over the two combatants like a breeze, and Mercury's skin blistered for a faint moment, before he asked the heat to settle, and it split away from them and the sect members - all neatly wrapped in shadow and ice by Juno.

Distracted, the old man looked over at his ancestor, and Mercury sighed. "Hey," he said, snapping his fingers. "Get your head in the game. I'm trying to steal your technique, here. Show me more."

"Steal my technique?!" the sect leader asked, instantly incensed. "Wretch! Give me some face! It took me ten years of swinging the sword and ten seasons of meditating on it to coalesce an aura! You will not simply *steal* it!"

Mercury looked at the old man as he swung. He'd learnt a lot about swords in his time on Chronagen, though, hadn't he? It was kind of funny. So much knowledge on forging and biomechanics had been drilled into his head. He was familiar with the flow of combat.

Not as intimately as people who lived and breathed it, mainly because his fight was different... but well, intent was flexible, wasn't it? So, Mercury looked upon what the sect leader did, the way his will wrapped around his weapon, sharpened its edge, and made it carve through the air so effortlessly.

"You're a lot worse than Yvette," Mercury noted drily. That woman was a far better warrior than him. But, then again, that wasn't exactly a compliment, because she was also... well. A personality. She'd gotten better, of course, and that had done wonders for her swordwork.

In fact, he saw some of her in the sect master. "You're too angry," Mercury advised as he parried another slash. "You rush ahead in a hurry. Why do you need to kill me so quickly? Focus a little, man." The words fell on deaf ears, but the advice made sense to Mercury himself.

Intent wasn't a tool of mass destruction. It was an enhancer, a limitbreaker, letting a sword strike further, cut better than it ever reasonably should. A regular blade could never pierce regular metal armor. But one covered in intent may slice right through. Doing more than a weapon normally should.

And that, perhaps, was his breakthrough.

Going past limits, huh? Mercury knew a little about that. His most evolved Skill, <Truth>, once was <Limitlessness>, after all. He smiled at the memory, and began to work.

He was wielding a sword, yes, and he tried to wrap his intent around it. At first, it was wisps of dissolving light, doing nothing much at all. But then, with each parry, the light grew denser. Mercury observed it, observed the shifting expression on the sect master.

The sword couldn't cut through other metal, not usually. But Mercury was good at making unreasonable requests. He could ask grass to grow, ask water to flow upstream, ask metal to reshape itself. Limits were more like... suggestions.

If he wanted his sword to cut steel, then who was the world to stop him?

Defiance wrapped around the blade, forming a denser sheen of light along its edge. It was still fragile, uneven, and weak, but the coating stuck, this time. Will clashed against will, and for the first time, the sect master took a step back. "I think I'm getting it," Mercury hummed with a smile.

"Damn you!" the old man growled, throwing himself at him in wild abandon.

Mercury sighed as he saw it, but obliged the old man. He moved in lockstep, manipulating his weight, his momentum, as he needed to. Flowing into combat, immersing himself, letting his mind process things far faster than they happened, evaluating the best choices, and drilling them into himself as instinct.

Every clash, he responded faster. Every time the two came to blows, it was easier. Every time, Mercury's intent wove thicker. And then, finally, Mercury smiled.

"Dear blade," he whispered to it. "Please, cut only what I will you to."

He stepped forward and swung it again.

The metal hummed with energy, silvery streamers trailing it through the air. It crashed into the sect master's block - and shattered his weapon utterly. The Qi shattered into glassy, glossy fragments, and Mercury's sword carried on unimpeded. It sank into the side of the sect master's chest, carved a brutal line of violence through it, and emerged out the other side.

Mercury hummed in please.

He'd cut apart the sect master without leaving a single wound.

[You have acquired the Skill <Weapon Intent lv. 1> through a specific action.]

[<Combat Sense> has levelled up! <Combat Sense lv. 6 -> 7>]

The old man gasped, grasping at his chest. Expecting to find blood, only for his hands to come away clean. His knees buckled from expected pain - pain which never hit him. He'd been cut. But he hadn't been *cut*.

"What?" he rasped, confused.

"My intent is peaceful, you old moron," Mercury said with a snicker. That'd been his breakthrough. He couldn't convince himself to have the weapon carve someone apart for being stupid. It didn't feel right to ask it to shed blood on his behalf.

But asking it to spare someone's life? Well, that was a terribly unreasonable thing to ask a sword, right? And *because* it was so unreasonable, it worked. Mercury's weapon intent - *weapon*, he noted, not sword - was one of mercy.

The sect leader crumbled, and his resolve fully shattered when the battered body of his ancestor landed in the dirt beside him. Zyl hung in the air, fire surrounding him. The sect leader regarded him with fear. "You embody a spirit," he gasped.

Zyl snickered. "Zaza. Something like that, sure." Slowly but surely, the ancestor rose her gaze, eyes no longer iron and defiant, to meet those of Mercury.

"This could have been so much simpler," the mopaaw sighed. "I wasn't even going to cause you any trouble. I'm just passing through. Let this be a lesson on greed, I guess," he said with a shrug. "Now. Are you gonna show me your sect's core techniques, or am I going to have to start picking locks? I'm not good at picking locks, mind you. And I'd really just *hate* to wreck your decor."

The two old monsters swallowed drily, looking at each other, and nodding slowly. "Yes, master cultivator," they admitted quietly. "We shall share our strength with you."

Mercury shook his head while Zyl laughed. "What a fricken pain. Alright, let's go," he said easily.

A moment later, the dream crumbled around them. <Astral Ascent> ended, and the aura of strength pooling off of Mercury vanished. To all senses, he was nothing other than an ordinary, somewhat eccentric middle-aged man again. With a smooth motion, he clasped his hands behind his back, tucking both his newly-won swords into the sash of his robes.

“Lead us there, then. I don’t have all day. There’s people expecting me to fix their kitchenware,” Mercury said, already looking forward to those simpler duties.