

Chapter 277: Icy Spirit Fog

It took Lucky a small while to retell the story, but in the end, it was nothing out of the ordinary. The two of them, him and the young mistress Ina of the Joo clan, were being set up for marriage. So, in one of their “dates”, she expressed frustration at the situation.

Lucky, being... well, not exactly a good guy, but a decent one back then, decided to help her out. They came up with a poisoning together, and Ina drank a tea that would make her appear to be dead to most means of identification. Her body vanished in the night, but they made a substitute using some help from the Joo clan’s physician.

And that was it. Lucky was banished for his poisoning, since they needed someone to lay the blame on and they couldn’t find an assassin, and the families had been fighting ever since. For territory and power and, most of all, honour.

“How moronic,” Mercury said with a sigh.

“Indeed, indeed,” Zyl nodded along. “Well, how are we going to fix this, my dear?”

The dragon’s voice was teasing, already knowing Mercury couldn’t resist solving a problem when he saw one. So, the mopaaw didn’t even fight it. He just gave a sigh, and nodded.

“How indeed. I doubt we can just find the Joo clan’s young mistress, nor would I want to make her return to a clan she wanted to run from. So how do we prove it?”

Zyl tilted his head. “Don’t you have a Skill that let’s you convince others you’re being truthful?”

“That won’t be enough,” Lucky said, crossing his arms and shaking his head. “Admitting that they were wrong to fight would bring even more shame over the families. They’d need something ironclad. Even if they all knew you were right, they’d continue to fight.”

“What a chore,” Mercury said with a sigh. “Well, thank you Lucky. This’ll help.” He clapped the other man on the shoulder, then got up and stretched. “I’ll figure out the rest when we’re there.”

Lucky gave him a confused look. “You... aren’t asking me to come with you?” he asked.

Mercury furrowed his brows. "No, why would I? I doubt you'd want to go back. Otherwise you wouldn't have become a bandit," he said calmly. The words made Lucky look aside, suddenly finding the floor more interesting, but he nodded nonetheless.

"I don't want to go back," he said quietly.

"Mhm, I get it," Mercury hummed. "Family can be hell. My parents tossed me to the street when I was 17. I slept on my brother's sofa for a long while, when looking for work. It also made me not wanna go back, so you don't need to, either. Live your own life, not the one your clan wants for you."

With that, he turned around and walked off. Lucky, Jean and Brock all seemed pleased with their newest occupations in construction. He didn't yet know what made Jean turn to banditry, but he also didn't need to. That truth was hers to share, even if he was burning with curiosity.

Zyl sat for a while longer with the rest of the people there, while Mercury headed to their room. He laid flat on the bed for a little while, closing his eyes and daydreaming softly. He was... more or less looking forward to the family feud stuff. Because clans were complicated, and he couldn't just intimidate them into not being terrible.

How troublesome indeed. "Juno, can't I just send you to find any and all evidence of their tampering?" he asked with a sigh.

The wolf in his shadow stirred, huffing with amusement at the question. "I doubt it, my liege."

"Mercury," he corrected her. "And why?"

"Because, Mercury," she said pointedly, "I suspect that with years having passed, there isn't too much evidence left. Perhaps a new diplomatic resolution is in order? Or you could get the physician to admit it, of course."

He hummed for a long while, then nodded. "That's a good place to start," he said simply. "Alright, once we're there, we'll check in with the physician. Surely that can't be so hard?"

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It turned out to be just that difficult.

First, of course, they had to say goodbye to all their friends. To Jean, Lucky, Brock and old Kan again. Then, they had to travel to the estate with Mira, which was a journey cut much shorter thanks to <Itinerant>.

Mira then introduced them to the Joo clan. To so very, very many members of the Joo clan. And he had to tell them so very many times that he wouldn't bow. Then two of the clan's scions challenged him to duels to the death, of course, which caused even more trouble.

After thoroughly embarrassing two children by snapping their flimsy little swords in half with his bare hands, he was finally allowed to move on with his life. When he greeted the elders, only one of them challenged him to a duel to the death for his disrespect.

Which he won, again.

"If you continue at this rate, the Joo clan may soon have a weapon shortage," their matriarch noted. The old woman sat on a throne in the middle of the hall of elders and was the last person Mercury was introduced to, as she had joined the meeting far later than anyone else. Some wayward visitor would have generally been beneath her notice, if it weren't for the fact that this wayward visitor had just trounced some of her family's warriors.

"I was brought here for my smithing skills," Mercury noted. "Though I would prefer to make armor, rather than weapons."

The matriarch tilted her head in curiosity, leaning her aged face on a thin arm, her skin clinging tight to her bones. "Oh?" she asked. "You are an armorer over a weaponsmith?"

Mercury smiled tightly, and shook his head. "I can make weapons just as well," he said simply, "but I do not enjoy helping others kill. If murder were my passion, I could just as well do it myself."

Instantly, whispers erupted in the hall at his audacity. The matriarch smiled at him, amused. "You've fixed young Mira's armor, then?"

"Yes."

"My, my. And you'd refuse us if we asked you for weapons?" she asked.

"Yes," Mercury said simply.

The whispers grew louder. The matriarch's smile widened. "Esteemed visitor, I do not yet know your name and you do not yet know mine. And still, you already doubt my judgment?"

Are you accusing the Joo clan of wantonly murdering without reason? You'd lump us in with the worst of the cults?" she asked.

Mercury already felt his tiredness growing. These endless politics. Why was there bureaucratic white-tape even in a fucking conversation? To have his words twisted like that, it annoyed him to no end. These were all vultures, every single one of them. That was the true divide between righteous and underworldly.

The underworldly cults at least admitted to being evil. They were predators, openly and honestly. They would murder and steal and hide and stake ambushes. They'd do everything and anything to grow stronger. That was their truth.

But the righteous clans? They did the same. Instead of being predators, though, they were scavengers. They'd wait for a sign of weakness, for a bit of carrion, then tear the meat from one's bones. And right now, they were preparing grievances against Mercury. Setting him up to make more mistakes, constructing a verbal trap to bleed him out.

"What is your name, matriarch?" he asked.

Waving a hand, the woman acted as if she was doing him some great favour. "You may call me matriarch Sung, wayward visitor."

Mercury nodded. "Well then, matriarch Sung. I will be open and honest with you." He smiled politely, and could already see the woman waiting for him to make a mistake. Every single elder was staring at him, hoping to bleed him dry. "I think your clan is beyond incompetent," he said. "I think your feud is unjustified, and you were, all of you, fooled by a pair of children. Your judgment is so impaired you'd attack your allies for a decade because of a simple trick. No, I would not lump you in with the cults. The cults, after all, murder for profit. You murder because of your own incompetence."

At that, he saw their jaws drop. Veins appeared on foreheads, and chilling killing intent spilled into the hall where visitors were greeted. Matriarch Sung glared at him with eyes so cold they might have turned a star into a block of thousand-year ice.

"Wayward visitor," the matriarch hisses like an insult. "Would you enlighten this old lady to your name?"

"You may call me visitor Starlight," Mercury replied gracefully, giving her his permission.

Once more, the old lady's gaze darkened. Her killing intent spilled forward so violently that Mira staggered back. But Mercury just stood, clasping his hands behind his back. It was funny, wasn't it?

Killing intent was probably some form of intimidation skill. Something like his old <Bloodlust>, except evolved. But, in that way, Mercury's "equivalent" to their killing intent would be <Unravel>. Which, logically, meant that with a bit of practice, maybe he should be able to press on people with it, too.

Trying it out just for fun, he pushed back on the killing intent with his own, and he felt a strange resonance. A mix of <Unravel>, <Truth> and his <Weapon Intent> spilled into the air, cutting through the oppressive pressure and unmaking it. Suddenly, the atmosphere felt almost calm around him, even though the air in the rest of the room was boiling. But Mercury was unbothered.

"Well then, visitor Starlight," matriarch Sung said, squeezing the armrest of her throne so hard her knuckles turned pale. "You have already stretched your hospitality thin. First, you spit on our hospitality with your rudeness, and now, you dare insult my clan's honour? You must have forgotten to give your host some face, boy."

Mercury tilted his head. It had been a while since someone called him a boy. What a strange experience to go through again after such a long time. "But matriarch Sung, all I am saying is the truth. Am I truly to blame for the fact that your young mistress Ina wanted to run away? Or is that your fault for being terrible guardians? Perhaps if you spent less time on killing your allies you might still have good relationships with your grandchildren."

"Enough!" the old woman barked. Her hair rose behind her back, floating furiously as she stood. "Silence, whelp. How dare you speak like that in our ancestral home? If I cut out your tongue you would still flap it too much. You know *nothing* of me and my clan, and it is clear you are too ignorant to learn. So, die where you stand, and may your corpse bring us some face back." A long glaive materialized in her grip.

Sighing softly, Mercury brought up a hand. "Hold on now. Ask the Joo clan's physician. You will see that my words are true."

The old lady scoffed at this, but nodded nonetheless. "Let us unveil your lies before I cut off your head, then, whelp."

Zyl leaned in to Mercury and whispered. "She sure has a temper, huh?"

“A little like Lucia,” Mercury replied quietly, which made Zyl snicker.

“A little...” the dragon repeated, shaking his head.

Only a few moments later, the old physician of the Joo clan joined them in the room. He was an old man, with a bent back, and his snow-white hair in a long braid down his back, while the top of his head remained bald. He clasped his hands and bowed to the matriarch.

“Physician Joo Jidong pays his respects to matriarch Sung.”

“Greeting, old Ji,” the matriarch says, her voice almost fond. “This visitor has made a grave accusation to your integrity.”

At that, the old man’s brows furrowed, and he turned to look at Mercury. “Has he now?”

“I said that you helped the Joo clan’s young mistress stage her death so she could run away,” Mercury said.

To his credit, the old man was a good actor. The frown on his face simply deepened, hiding the faint twitch of his muscles. “Now, why would I do that?” Joo Jidong asked.

“Because, sir Joo, you are a decent person. Which is why I ask you to speak the truth. Otherwise, I fear I may lose my head to your matriarch’s wrath,” Mercury said calmly, cupping his hands.

At that, Joo Jidong’s frown deepened. Not with malice, but with concern. He had sacrificed people before to keep this affair a secret, but it had never been so in his face. Someone who very genuinely was about to be executed in front of him was different from a battlefield he didn’t have to see.

But, despite that, the old man shook his head. “I have no idea what you’re speaking of, esteemed visitor,” he said calmly, closing his eyes. “Please, do not besmirch my name with your insidious words. I would not lie to the Joo clan.”

Mercury smiled faintly, even as the matriarch’s stormy mood turned even darker. The old lady turned to the mopaaw and slowly lifted her glaive, pointing the blade at his neck. This was made less frightening by the fact that she was still sat in her chair and more than a dozen steps away, but Mercury could still feel the cold edge of steel.

“Matriarch Sung, by all means, what would it take for you to believe me?” he asked politely.

At that, the old woman scoffed. "Nothing could make me believe you. You'd have to show me my own living daughter if you wanted me to believe it."

Smiling softly, Mercury gave a sigh. "That might be troublesome," he said. "But I can prove to you that the body is fake."

Instantly, the room burst into yelling. Physician Joo Jidong creased his brows further, his lips tilting downwards into a deep frown. Mercury could see his thoughts racing through what techniques could be used to identify the body. He'd done a good job with it, after all. The bloodline was right, the bone marrow was correct, he'd even instilled a small mind-graft for lingering mental processes.

Yet, when he looked at this stranger, it was clear that the man meant it. Mercury smiled calmly as he waited, giving the floor a small tap with his foot - and for a single blink, his shadow flickered. But then, it was back to being entirely ordinary. Every single person of note in the Joo clan was staring at Mercury with a mix of animosity and curiosity.

About half of them asked for his head on a pike right then, while the other half wanted to see this so-called proof of his. Neither of them were good actions, though. Letting him touch the body of a clan member would be a loss of face either way. Killing him would simply be an admission of guilt.

"Visitor Starlight," the old woman ground out, the armrest of her chair splintering in her brutal grip. "You better be able to back these words of yours up."

Smiling softly, Mercury nodded. "Of course, matriarch Sung. I am a man of bold claims, but I am not a man of broken words."

In truth, of course, Mercury had no such elegant solution prepared. But he was rather sure he could find one before time was up. After all, Juno was already out, inspecting the physician's laboratory for any remaining notes on the process. And he, himself, was rather excellent at finding out the truth of something.

Again, it was all a matter of finding something that was convincing. But, in the worst case, he could always simply look at the body properly. He was sure he'd find something. Really, right then, he was mostly grateful for his <Guest> title, because without it, he probably would have had his head cut off already.

"Fine then," matriarch Sung said, lifting her glade, and slamming its heel onto the floor. "Bring us to the crypt."

One of the elders immediately protested. "Matriarch Sung, you cannot be serious!" she yelled. "We invite this... wanderer into our ancestral grounds and the first thing he does is demand to see the young mistress Ina's corpse?! We should cut off his arms and throw this wastrel to the streets!"

The matriarch shot the elder a deep glare, holding out her free hand to silence the voices. "Quiet, now. You must forgive an old, sentimental woman," she said, turning her face to Mercury. "For if there is any hope of my daughter living, then I must hear it out."

Her stony face said she didn't care a whiff about her daughter, but to say as much would be suicide, then, Mercury noted. What a shrewd old woman. He could debate her integrity if he wanted to, but so long as that integrity stood, her actions, even in indulging a worthless wastrel, were righteous. And if he was proven correct, she could show joy over it, as a mother.

Clever, Mercury noted mentally. Very clever. But she still would have to stop the feud if he showed the corpse as being fake. That was his true goal for now, after all. He didn't care a hint about their honour or reputation. All he cared about was making sure they stopped killing each other.

So, when matriarch Sung walked down the steps with all the arduity that belonged to a woman of her age. She complained about her knees, her back, and her feet all the way down, shooting Mercury pointed glares, but she walked nonetheless.

First, past him, then past physician Joo Jidong, who hurried to follow her. As did Mercury and Zyl, and even Mira, who walked along with a grimace, rapidly regretting having brought Mercury in. She carefully wiped her lips, blood having coated them when the killing intent crashed into her.

A long few steps passed, until Mercury and Zyl were given blindfolds to tie around their eyes. Of course, the blindfolds were magical, meant to suffocate all senses, but it wasn't like that would stop Mercury. It was a little funny when the attendant had to reach beneath the veil of his hat to apply it, but soon, he was walking again, led by the arm.

And not too long after, only a few thousand steps, he was told to remove the blindfold - and found himself in a crypt indeed.

It was an underground room, yet it was green with grass. There was a calm lake, full of lily flowers, floating peacefully, and a thin fog laid heavily across the green. It would have been

easy to assume it was aboveground, except for the cave roof that towered over them, and the stone walls lined with jade coffins.

The sight was eerie. The room was cold, but not horrendously so, and the water flowed smoothly from a source in the wall, into the pond, and then escaped into a river, through a grate in the side of the room. It was peaceful, and melancholic. The only light source was faintly glowing orbs that hovered around the room like fireflies.

Matriarch Sung paid no attention to any of the wondrous sights. She walked briskly across a bridge of pale pink wood, crossing to the other side of the pond, and then strode along the wall of coffins. Mercury, Zyl, and physician Joo Jidong all followed her calmly, having left their attendants by the entrance.

A moment passed when Juno slid into Mercury's shadow again, and the two briefly exchanged a conversation. Mercury didn't *exactly* have a telepathy skill, but Juno had something quite similar - her voice was a tiny, thin whisper next to his ear, and he could return a message just the same.

"Found his notes on faking a death," the wolf explained. "I read them all, but the most interesting part is that the bodies are all those of mortals. They will have no signs of ever having cultivated. Which wouldn't be noticed in a jade coffin burial, but be very easy to see if you tested."

Mercury smiled calmly at the news, nodding his head softly. "Thank you, Juno," he replied. "That is very helpful."

After another dozen steps, matriarch Sung stopped. She turned, staring at an alcove in the wall, filled by a jade coffin. She took a deep breath, then nodded. "This," she said, "houses the body of my daughter, little Ina. She has been resting there for almost two decades now. This better be worth my while."

Gingerly, her hand moved forward, resting on the pale jade of the sarcophagus. A thin tendril of qi passed from her into the material, and then, she pulled. The thing swung open, and Joo Ina's body was revealed. In pristine condition, as if she were just sleeping, with chilling fog rolling outwards.

She was dressed in elegant fabrics, despite her burial, her hair done up with pins and jewelry, as if she were about to head to a wedding. Mercury felt a little sad for the girl, thinking that this facsimile of hers probably was the first time she met her family's rigorous expectations.

But being sad wasn't his duty, being correct was. "Say, did your daughter cultivate?" Mercury asked calmly.

Instantly, Joo Jidong's eyes widened. His breath hitched for a brief moment, almost unnoticeable, but his stare at Mercury was clear. Matriarch Sung narrowed her eyes. "Yes," she said. "Little Ina cultivated. She was quite good at it, too. Not a prodigy like me, but rather talented, reaching the polished-realm at her age."

Mercury nodded. Very gently, he reached forward, turning to the matriarch. "May I?" he asked.

The old woman watched his movements carefully, but nodded for now. With a slow motion, Mercury did the least invasive thing he could imagine - plucking a single hair.

"Now, when cultivators cultivate, their hair is the truest tell of it," he mused. "Because, of course..."

"New hair always grows with the strength of a new breakthrough," Joo Sung agreed. "Little Ina cut her hair, though. She would not have all her stages marked on it."

Smiling faintly, Mercury nodded. "Indeed. It would be polished-realm hair, all the way down, yes?"

"Of course," matriarch Sung said. "What is your point."

Holding the strand to her, he nodded. "Break it," he said.

"What?"

"Pull the strand of hair apart, and tell me if it requires the strength of somewhat at the polished realm."

Frowning deeply, matriarch Sung did reach out and take the hair. It was invasive and rude, but it was far better than any other tests he could imagine. With a swift motion, the old woman pulled the hair into two pieces. And then, instantly, her eyes widened. "That isn't the hair of my daughter," she whispered. Her eyes fell on Joo Jidong, the old physician. "It really isn't."

Joo Jidong gritted his teeth. "Now, now," he said carefully. "We know not if the physicality of little Ina was degraded by the icy spirit fog in her coffin. Perhaps this is simply age?"

The matriarch stared, then, slowly nodded. "Right, of course," she agreed readily. Her eyes fixed on Mercury again. The shock wore off, but then her mind rattled. She realized that her daughter was already gone, and she never cared for the kid, anyway. Instead, she was a shrewd sect-leader. She needed this justification for a feud, so she could continue to steal from the Yung family, without repercussions.

A little bit of war was good for resources, after all.

Mercury frowned at that. This place was too private. But, to his favour, there was a simple trick he had up his sleeve. He held up a second hair, then vanished it in his inventory.

"Matriarch Sung," he said calmly. "What do you think will happen if I take this hair to the Yung family?"

She furrowed her brows. "Nothing will happen," she hissed. "You'll be revealed as a liar and a fraud!"

Shaking his head, Mercury sighed. "No. If I show them the truth, they'll recognize it as such. They'll ask an alchemist to consult with them about the icy spirit fog, and they'll learn it causes no such physical degradation. Especially not to mortal grade."

The matriarch gritted her teeth. She squeezed her glaive. "Joo Jidong," she hissed. "We will have words over this. But, before then, it seems I must kill you, visitor Starlight."

Mira's eyes widened at that. "What?!" she said. "But, he just showed that-"

"Silence, child," the matriarch snarled. "You know nothing. You saw nothing. None of this ever happened. Down here, this wayward vagrant has shown himself a fool and will die. That is all."

"Joo Jidong," Mercury said calmly. "You would let your matriarch kill an innocent to continue this meaningless war? I know you can abide suffering if it is far away, but you do not strike me as this cold-blooded."

The physician stared at him, eyes wide, hands shaking. He had once, a long time ago, helped a young woman escape this clan. Now, suddenly, he was faced with his choice from back then. He wanted to keep little Ina safe, to make sure the family would never come for her... but he could not watch someone be slaughtered in front of him. Because Joo Jidong was a coward.

So, he sighed, out loud, and nodded. "I did it," he said. His voice was quiet, mournful. "I helped little Ina escape."

Instantly, the matriarch whirled around to him, staring in indignation. "You admit it?! Then I will put you to death as well!"

"Grand-aunt, stop this!!" Mira said in horror, standing in front of the crooked old physician. "What is this? You find out my aunt is alive, and you say you will kill anyone who knows? Why?!"

"That is what righteousness is, child," matriarch Sung hissed. "It means finding reasons to fight, stealing only from those who deserve it. And right now, the Yung clan deserves it."

"Evidently not!" Mira protested, spreading her arms wide. Joo Jidong looked at her back with quivering eyes, and Zyl just smiled. "Clearly there was a misunderstanding!"

Matriarch Sung frowned. "And that misunderstanding is one we exploit," she said. "It is one we can use. So we must preserve it."

"You would kill for this? Just to kill more?" Mira asked, her eyes wide. Before, she'd been disillusioned. The fighting had been going on for two decades - nearly as long as she lived. Just long enough to remember what it was like to not be in a feud, though. Enough to want that back. "Grand-aunt, you must be possessed! The kind aunt Sung I know would never do this!"

At that, the old woman's eyes quivered, and her grip on the glaive wavered. But, in a moment of resolution, she squeezed it harder. Her hand came forward in a swift chop, knocking Mira unconscious. Then, the glaive spun through the air, slamming towards Mercury's neck with predestined murder.

Except, he casually brought up his arm. The glaive cut through his skin, his flesh, then crashed against steel-tough bone - and stopped dead. Instantly, silvery blood poured from the wound, but when the old woman drew back, Mercury just smiled. Joo Jidong watched on as his skin writhed for a moment, then closed over the gap in his flesh.

Calmly, Mercury's storm-robos wove themselves shut over his arm again, and he just stood there, calmly. With a very gentle motion, he closed the coffin again, ensuring the continued preservation of whatever mortal corpse had been used to create Joo Ina's fake body. Mercury breathed in calmly, standing there unharmed, to matriarch Sung's and Joo Jidong's great surprise.

In the end, Zyl broke the silence with a faint snicker. Mercury gently smacked his boyfriend on the shoulder, with all the force of a feathery pillow, and then turned his eerie veil towards the matriarch. "Well then," he said. "Now that we've all learnt that you cannot kill me, perhaps it's time to talk."