

Chapter 302: Jealous Star

Mercury was, in his own eyes, a phenomenally reasonable person. He had his flaws, to be sure! He was a bit quick to anger when dehumanized, he was stubborn and hard-headed, he got frustrated when he didn't understand things. But, all in all, he found his decisions to be pretty understandable. To him, at least, they were rather logical.

Which made it all the funnier when he was deemed a complete whacko by the standards of the Skyflame Monk, because to him, they looked like morons.

Walking into their infirmary, what Mercury found was young idiots who'd burnt themselves. Probably purposefully. The injuries ranged from rougher sunburns that left the skin red and peeling to deeper burns that affected the mobility of whole limbs. The worst part is that most of the injuries were near self-inflicted.

Training accidents were common, and the Skyflame Monks weren't exactly known for practicing tremendously safe techniques. Elder Yue led them inside, then brought them to the bed of a young man whose entire left arm had turned to charcoal. "This here is disciple Ling. He trained the third form of the Skyflame palm and failed to route the qi properly, leading to an explosion just beneath his skin."

And despite that, Ling gave a bright grin when called out. "I'll do better next time, elder," he promised, clenching the fingers on his other hand. "I almost had it, too!"

"You almost died is what you had," elder Yue chided him with a scowl. Gesturing at the young idiot, who still seemed enormously satisfied with himself, she turned to Keiko. "See what I have to deal with Keikei? Kids these days!"

The old healer chuckled at that, while rummaging through her enormous pack. "Kids indeed," she said, a faint smile on her lips. She looked happier than Mercury had ever seen her before starting an operation, as if thinking of fond memories. "Were we ever this suicidal?"

At that, elder Yue Mei flinched. "No... we were worse," she admitted with a shake of her head.

Zyl snickered. The dragon probably couldn't quite relate - his own mastery over fire was quite instinctive, after all. But perhaps there was a time where he'd burnt himself with his

own flames. That did make Mercury wonder whether Zyl could burn himself? Probably, since he needed a lot of Skills to manage the heat of his crown.

With a shake of his head, Mercury banished those thoughts and looked at the kid with the burnt arm. Ling had done a tremendously good job at burning himself like hell. Mercury looked and saw.

“How deep is the burn?” Keiko asked, her own perception weaker than Mercury’s.

“About an inch.” With a narrowing of his eyes, he added, “deeper where there’s more muscle. The burns don’t reach his bones, but they messed up his soft tissues.”

“Internal bleeding?”

“Some,” Mercury said with a tilt of his head. “His meridians are all messed up, too.”

Keiko nodded, calmly pulling out gauze and scissors. “Common injury from technique failures. We’ll have to set them back into place, or he’ll end up with cultivation damage.”

“What?!” For the first time since they started talking, Ling replied. “My cultivation has been damaged?”

His voice was loud enough to ring through the infirmary, earning them a swift few stares that quickly faded when the other nurses noticed elder Yue. The old woman herself gave Ling a long, not-so-subtle glare. “You’re lucky you’re alive, Ling. Cherish yourself more.”

At that, the boy gave an awkward smile. Mercury could tell the words didn’t really reach him. “The fire was really pretty though...”

With a soft sigh, Keiko placed her fingers on his forehead, and sent in a quick blast of qi that knocked the boy unconscious before he said anything even more stupid than that. Seriously, how had he blown himself up and regretted it so little? Mercury frowned.

“We’ll need skin grafts,” Keiko said calmly, wheeling the boy on the cottage into another room. “We can take small seed patches from his other arm - the healing elixirs can help restore them from there. Cut out a few. Half an inch across at the most.”

Mercury nodded, and quickly set to work once the doors shut behind them. He used a scalpel to outline the cuts, then <Carved> them from the tissue underneath, leading to quick, clean separation. Keiko, in the meantime, set about dealing with the burnt, dead skin on his other arm. It was bloody work, all about judging what they could get away with leaving intact.

They had to cut so deep that Mercury saw the boy's meridians hanging in the empty air, ghostly outlines where his cultivated physique no longer matched his physical body. They were so twisted that Mercury could have confused them for a tangled bit of thread, curling and knotting in on itself.

Elder Yue's eyes glowed as she observed the boy, and her lips tilted into a frown. "Damn. He really hurt himself."

Instead of that, Keiko just waved her off. "Don't mind the energy body damages. We'll need to put him back together first."

But that wasn't quite the truth, was it? Mercury wondered. They'd operated on cultivators before, of course, but it had been mostly physical, and mostly lower realms. This boy, despite everything, was strong. He had a solid foundation, and his techniques were high quality. The channels he had created to route his energy through were a lot like Mercury's mana veins.

Nowadays, of course, Mercury didn't really need those anymore - they'd fused into <Internal Energy>, after all, which allowed him much more freeform control over everything inside of him. <Origin Qi> also made it easier to control and meld the energies, though it was a more violently minded Skill.

All that was to say that, despite everything, Mercury had a pretty decent picture about how to interact with the meridians, and he had a rather decent proclivity for weaving. Especially with how the Gilded-Realm let him manipulate how he could interact with reality, and how his rezil let him alter reality.

The step that old Dremaweaver had taught him after ihn'ar, the way that he could resonate and synchronize with reality... he felt a hint of that idea buzz in the back of his mind.

Mercury reached out with his hand, in the gaps where there had been flesh. The remaining energy body, the qi that had once flowed cleanly throughout Ling's body was all scrambled - but it responded to Mercury's touch. Even though it had an owner.

Yue's eyes widened. Even Keiko gave a quick, surprised glance. "What are you doing?" the Skyflame elder gasped, moving to grab onto his wrist.

Mercury let her, simply waiting, not willing to speak a word lest he lose his focus. Keiko was the one to speak up for him. "Let him," the old healer told her friend. "He gets like that sometimes."

Letting the old women fuss about the specifics, the mopaaw simply reached out with his gloved hand. His eyes were visible through his veil now, glowing with faint bits of power. Almost by accident, Mercury pulled the veils back from the world. Reason, Reality, and Separation tore in front of him like paper.

The world cracked at the seams, its true fragility revealed as a sprawling truth in front of his eyes. Elder Yue involuntarily took a step back, even if it didn't remove her any further from the source of that unease. Distance meant little to Mercury, these days, after all.

But he wasn't focused on her, or anyone else in the room. Instead, his hand reached out and touched the messed up meridians of the idiot kid who'd blown himself up. His fingers didn't phase through that ethereal matter, as they should have. Instead, he found purchase. He touched them like a seamster might take a piece of thread.

With a swift, singular motion, the tangled Meridians <Unravelled>. Elder Yue's eyes widened.

Usually, <Unravel> was a Skill whose visuals were odd. To some, there was nothing to be seen at all. And to Mercury, it manifested the most intricate, beautiful tapestry of string. It was odd to describe how he applied it.

But right there, he used it on the boy's energy body. His meridians, the pathways for his qi. Something that any cultivator could perceive - and so, all the cultivators saw the way it came undone, rolled out into a tapestry in the air, hovering above the boy.

Golden lines of fire wrote his training in the air. Every drop of sweat he'd shed, every muscle he'd ever strained, every minute enlightenment he'd found while meditating, all laid bare. Mercury looked upon the tapestry, and hummed to himself. "I see," he said, after a few moments. Then he reached out.

"Stop!" Elder Yue yelled, despite her apprehension. "You know nothing of the techniques he's practiced! If you mess up, you'll ruin this boy's future forever!"

Mercury tilted his head at that, then smiled faintly and shook it. From behind his veil, he stared at the elder, and a shiver ran down her back. "Apologies for being presumptuous, elder Yue, but I actually disagree. I think I've just figured out the technique he used."

The old woman's jaw dropped. "No way. No, it takes disciples months to master even just the first form, they often start training when they're just young kids. Even masters would take-

Ignoring her, Mercury hummed to himself. He understood <Fire>, after all. It was part of his <Magic>, now. He had an intrinsic grasp on anything metaphysical, so he understood the technique within moments of laying eyes on it. The boy's cultivation was based in fire, so Mercury quickly adjusted his meridians.

Now that they were unspooled, he could move them about with little trouble. Of course, he had to consider where they'd end up in the boy's body, but with his mind, that didn't cause much of an issue, either. At the end of the day, he was a sorcerer, and this was a kid he was helping with magic.

Mercury had learnt very few formal spells, but he also grasped those quickly. Mana transmutation, for example. This was very similar. Really, the meridians stole quite a few patterns from a simple fire-transmutation circle, meant to prime mana for fire spells.

And so, he fixed it. With a few quick waves of his hand, and under elder Yue's shocked stare, Mercury repaired the boy's cultivation - even shored up a mistake or two in his foundation that might have caused him to struggle against future bottlenecks.

Then, after about two minutes, Mercury sighed softly, and smiled. "Looks good to me," he said, after patching a few more spots with his own origin qi, giving the meridians temporary supports that would dissolve once the boy could remake those spots himself. So, without any further ado, he deactivated <Unravel>, and the meridians spooled back into the kid's body.

His chest rose with a sudden, instant gasp as his cultivation snapped back into place, like a taut rubber band smacking him in the face. But it was only a gasp of surprise, not of pain. A moment later, Keiko sent another jolt of qi into his head, knocking him out cold, mainly so he didn't have to see his own mangled arm.

Elder Yue stared at Mercury with a mix of horror and awe - which, really, he got surprisingly often these days. The old woman's mouth was slightly agape. "What *are* you?" she asked, quietly.

Shaking his head softly, Mercury let the veils fall back into place. His resonance with the world dimmed, then faded away. He took in a long, slow breath, until he felt properly grounded again, then smiled. "Just a regular cultivator, elder Yue. Don't mind me too much."

"Stop chattering and help me stem the bleeding," Keiko said with a bit of frustration in her voice. She was using her qi to manipulate the blood, gingerly keeping it circulating where the boy had lost too much mass, while his body struggled to regenerate under the healing elixirs.

Mercury quickly nodded, and brought out the stifled silence, freezing much of the world. He used it to create channels of solidified reality for the boy's blood to flow through while his veins regrew.

Another utterly insane feat that made elder Yue sputter and stare. Zyl snickered at the audience reaction, finding it as amusing as always, but Mercury simply did as always. He helped Keiko heal, in his own, bizarre way.

His current teacher was a strong, learned woman. She did much to help the boy's recovery along. Breaking down harmful energies in his body, cutting and burning away residue from mistakes in cultivation, removing impurities, and even mending his meridians where they had not just gone twisted but also cracked.

It took them about half an hour until the boy's arm had regenerated. They'd applied skin grafts, and with the healing elixirs, Mercury had watched new skin grow outwards from those patches like spreading moss, crawling to cover the boy's arm. It was a strange procedure, and for a moment, he seemed to grimace with pain, until Mercury stole that feeling away.

With his body turning numb and painless, disciple Ling's sleep once again turned restful. His face relaxed, as his arm fixed itself, his energy body back in place underneath it all. When the last bit of skin had regrown, Keiko wiped her forehead with a soft sigh, then put her hands to her waist. "There," she said. "All done. Cart him out and bring me another patient."

Elder Yue blinked at the boy's restored hand, then she smiled and shook her head. "Impossible. But I suppose I shouldn't have expected any less from the demon doctor and her disciple." She clapped her hands, loudly. "Alright, everyone! Chop chop, it's a busy day at the infirmary, bring in another of my idiot disciples!"

With quick motions, the local nurses and doctors brought in another disciple, though this one's burns were less severe, they were more widespread. She'd damaged her qi pool, too, the ethereal energy leaking from her body bit by bit, damaging her foundation.

How did these things even happen in training accidents? Mercury couldn't help but wonder what the Skyflame Monks did to get their students this hurt. When he saw cultist children stabbing each other, that much was disgusting but at least in line with the theme. It was a cult, after all. But this was meant to be a more righteous-leaning monastery.

Yet, looking at just the injuries, Mercury thought it was really a rather rough place, too. Was that just the entirety of the cultivation world? Was everyone involved in these sorts of martial

arts some kind of idiot? Did none of these people have any sort of impulse control or adequate supervisory practices? It was kind of sad, he thought.

Regardless of all that, though, Mercury focused on the patient in front of him. Mangled meridians, burns covering her. So, he set to work.

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After going through a dozen and a half kids who'd somehow almost ruined their entire future with one messy training routine, Mercury was tired. Not properly tired, of course - between his zeyjn and <Mindbloom>, he didn't really need sleep at all. But he found the wounds exhausting.

There was something so life-sapping about being surrounded by suffering, even if these kids were braver about it than most of the patients he'd had. They were all hurt, and messed up in different ways, but all of them smiled about their techniques. Mercury could tell that despite everything, they loved cultivating.

It was an odd thing to consider, the way that people were passionate. He'd seen arrogant cultivators in his time. He'd seen sad cultivators who struggled with their powers. But he had never seen a single cultivator who genuinely despised the techniques they practiced.

Which... was a nice thought, he supposed. That even in the cults, people were there because they wanted to be. They decided to risk their lives, join the martial world, for even a chance to rise above being mortal. Reaching for the skies.

He thought that was what cultivation was all about. Which is why his next conversation with elder Yue surprised him.

The old woman had taken him to the garden in the valley. Much of the place was yellow rock, lime- and sandstone sitting in layers. It was a hot, dry place. But they still cultivated plants and gardens, watered by cores.

Amusingly, these weren't mana cores, like Mercury was used to. They held the same name, but they really were the crystallized dantians of beasts that had risen far enough to form them. Water-aspected beast cores could be used much in the same way that aspected mana cores could be used.

In this case, the Skyflame Monks also honoured their deceased by integrating their cores into the infrastructure of their monastery. Dead elders' cores would be used to create

cultivation rooms, far more saturated with qi, for example. These sorts of things were the foundation backing factions, and what allowed them to create more talent.

Mercury, of course, didn't see the inside of a cultivation room. Instead, he was told to meditate in the garden with elder Yue for his first lesson.

"The foundation of the Skyflame Arts is to discard ambition," she told him.

"Discard ambition?" Mercury asked in reply. It was a confusing sentiment, seemingly at odds with cultivation. Everything he'd learnt was about defying the heavens, reaching for the sky, and yet now, it was needed to discard that?

Elder Yue smiled faintly, as if it was a conversation she'd had dozens, hundreds of times.

"Yes," she said. "You need to get rid of the selfish desire for power to rise higher. Rising should not be the goal - it comes about as a natural consequence of mastery. Instead of seeking to rise above the heavens, we should instead endeavour to master the self."

Hm. Mercury thought that those two really didn't sound too different from each other. In the end, both chased power. It was a minor shift of perspective at best. "What does mastering the self entail?" he asked.

"Discipline and kindness," elder Yue replied at first. "Exercise often, and treat the artes with respect. They will respect you in turn. The Skyflame Artes demand much practice to achieve mastery, and they require frequent rest, too, lest one's channels burn out. Like those of some of the disciples you saw."

Mercury tilted his head. Was she telling him that people studying their school of magic needed a work-life balance or would, quite literally, burn-out? That seemed rather at odds with much of cultivation, that much was true. Most of it seemed focused on a single-minded, absolutely relentless pursuit of power.

Gun-Byeong certainly wouldn't take days off from violence, Mercury imagined. The man, the peak master of Slaughter, was a battle-maniac. If he had a chance to get into a good fight, he'd take it. Compare that to the Skyflame Artes that might require scheduled breaks and time off...

It was an interesting thing to see. People who throw themselves so completely into their chosen disciplines, yet in such different ways. Were most cultivators, perhaps, workaholics? Even here, the students studying the artes tended to hurt themselves by being overzealous in practice.

Mastering the self was, then, about achieving discipline to temper desire, maybe? Mercury knew that desire was rather important on Chronagen. It was the deciding factor for Skills being granted and growth being achieved. Not the only factor, of course. There was time invested, effort spent, and a myriad other factors, but most of them were influenced by desire.

Wanting something purely because one loved that thing was the best way to get good. Because passion drove effort and effort drove improvement.

Maintaining that passion, be that with a burning intensity, or by maintaining scheduled breaks and making sure to find balance... he couldn't say which was better. It came down to the person, he imagined. At the very least, Mercury found that this place treated its students with more care than the cults. They didn't seem as willing to let the kids kill each other.

Which was a really, really low bar to pass. But given what he'd seen of the martial world, well. He wouldn't be surprised if this place, too, hosted tournaments or dangerous missions. For now, though, he discarded those thoughts.

"So, the artes need to be practiced with measure?" Mercury asked. Yue nodded. "That explains diligence, but not kindness."

"Sharp. Kindness is about the self, but also fellow disciples. Your flames must not be turned on the undeserving. They will feast on your doubt and harm you. If you unleash them, it should be either for mastery, or for the truly deserving. So, be kind. Do not casually use your fire, not for a demonstration and not for fun. It is a weapon, after all," elder Yue explained.

Mercury nodded along as she spoke. That made enough sense. A technique that required discipline to study and, when used, demanded absolute certainty. Framing it as kindness was more or less a measurement to ensure their students did not turn into arrogant young scions.

Then again, that probably still happened. Hopefully at a reduced rate, at least, but when handing supernatural weapons to children, well. It was only a matter of time until someone got hurt.

Sighing softly, Mercury nodded again. His eyes drifted over the manuals. They read more like an earth-aspected technique than fire, at times. Much of it was about staying grounded. Maintaining a firm connection to the mortal realm, never growing too arrogant, and using techniques only when required.

But it was, still, a fire technique at heart.

Explosive motions, brutal violence, and a lack of restraint marked its actual application. The philosophy about how that fire was to be wielded and contained was different - perhaps to help manage collateral damage or emotional impact of it - but it was still, at heart, an art of violence.

Mercury read their cultivation basics, the way they structured their reforging process, and even the ascent into the gilded realm. How they gathered, aspected, and treated their qi. Locking it up tight, moving it in supremely violent bursts through meridians that needed to be tempered like solid steel. Using one's own body to momentarily contain and channel explosions.

It was a supremely brutal way of fighting. Hence why it needed absolute surety when released. Hesitation spelled extensive internal damage. Mangled meridians, cracked and scorched dantians, broken bones and torn muscles. The technique promised power, but made extensive demands.

And that was fine by Mercury. He didn't need to master it fully, after all. All he needed to do was grasp its most important bits, and the ones he could learn. "How, then, does it protect against curses?" he asked.

Elder Yue smiled at that question. "Ordinarily? The fire feasts on them. But in your case..." Her head tilted as she paused talking, her eyes fixated on his chest, as if staring right through him. "In your case, I think humility would help."

"Humility?" Mercury asked.

She nodded seriously. "Yes. You see, Mercury, as dumb as it sounds, I think the sun might be jealous of you."