

Chapter 274: Bottom Line

Mercury felt his blood rush through his body. It was made from ice and wood and flesh and bone, and yet still, blood pumped through it. It may have been silvery, metallic blood, woven from light and flesh and ice and air, but it was blood, and it boiled.

So, with all that anger, he moved controlled. He rose gently, slowly, up from the table, walked over to the laughing young lord, and laid a hand on his shoulder. "Friend," he said. "There is no need for that. Stand down. No need to make a scene."

"You dare lay your hand on a scion of the Lilac Sky sect? I could have your hand for this, foreigner," he spat the word as if it was an insult. Mercury just gently tilted his head. It was rather accurate, really. He wasn't from this world, even. And he far preferred "foreigner" over something like "beast".

Instead, he just pleasantly smiled. "Cut off my hand, then," he said, extending his arm.

Instantly, the young master ground to a halt. "H-huh?"

"Cut off my hand," Mercury repeated slowly. "Go on. You said I deserved it. If you want my hand to leave us alone, then *take it*."

He watched as the young man swallowed, clearly taken aback. Even his posse, more younglings wearing lilac robes, though none as embroidered as the master's, seemed to flinch at the statement. "W-Well," he stuttered.

"Do you need help perhaps?" Mercury asked, tilting his head. "Hand me your sword then. I will cut off my hand for you. Seems they don't teach their disciples to follow through on threats at the Lilac Skies sect, is that it?"

And that made the young man break. The provocation of his sect, the place that brought him all the status he had, was something unacceptable. It was worse than spitting on the graves of his parents. It was worse than calling him a little piss boy. It was an unforgivably grave insult to his honor, a slap to his face. And the young man drew his sword.

Mercury watched the blade with curiosity in his eyes. He saw the way its tip shook slightly in the air, even as the young man spoke angrily. He looked over the lines and waves in the metal, noting that whoever made it was good... but not as good as the nails Mercury made.

There was a beautiful pattern along both sides, and elegant runes engraved along its centre. The crossguard was gilded, too, speaking of prestige, shaped as some family sigil, probably.

“You will regret your word. Bite your tongue, cur, lest you taint the air by screaming in pain,” the youth ground out from between gritted teeth.

“Get on with it then,” Mercury waved his hand.

And, to his credit, that was all it took. The blade cut through the air, slammed into Mercury’s skin - and then ground to a halt about halfway through. It slammed into bone with a resounding, miserable scraping noise. “I think your edge alignment was off,” Mercury noted drily, as blood flowed from it.

He made sure the blood looked crimson, despite everything, and the young master seemed a little scared. “Wanna give it another go?” Mercury asked calmly.

This barely hurt him. With <Assimilation>, he could heal it rather quickly, and with <Babbling Brook>, the pain was nothing. He didn’t even flinch. The young master looked at it, at the way the sword rang, at his own shaking hands, the sweat covering his face, then he grit his teeth.

Simple mission his ass! The elder said he just had to cause a scene with the bandits. Now the entire damn inn was staring at his shame. He had to keep going. Couldn’t back down. There was only cutting or losing. The world honed in to the edge of his blade, and he cut again-

Just as Mercury deactivated <Tempered Body>.

The hand came off easily, more like that of a toy than a human’s, and Mercury caught it before it stained the floors any further. Blood pooled from the wound, as the kid stumbled forward, his sword lodging itself in the floor. He was bent over awkwardly, and it took a moment to withdraw the blade, leaving him panting heavily, his Qi in disarray from the awkward motion.

Mercury just fixed the young master in his eyes, and held out his severed digit. “Here you are then. My hand.”

At that, the martial artist just stared. He swallowed again. It was a dry, horrid motion. “You... you can keep it, foreigner,” he managed.

“Ah, very well,” Mercury said, storing it away. Then, he leaned his stump on the scion’s shoulder, blood dripping onto his robes. “Say, is our debt settled now?”

“You stain the honor of my sect with your presence, still,” the young man somehow managed. “I ask you to leave.”

“Now, now. I took your honor, you took my hand. What’s a little fight between friends?” Mercury asked with a gentle smile. “Come, sit. Let this foreign friend pay for your soup.” He waved his stump in the air. “Innkeep! Four bowls, for Lucky and our friends here.”

And with those words, despite the bit of blood and soup on the ground, the noise slowly returned to the inn. People stopped holding breaths and turned towards their own food again, breathing sighs of relief.

When cultivators fought, mortals often added up as fodder. Hurt on the sidelines. They’d feared a splintered table at least, shards of glass and wood spraying across the room. They’d feared a collapsed building, or a part of the city turned into a crater at worst.

So, in comparison? A little bit of blood was a relief to most of these people. Mercury took a tissue, pressing it against the slowly stemming tide of vital fluid calmly. Jean, Lucky, and Brock were just staring at him, while Zyl wore a curious smile. The disciples of the sect moved in accordance with him, shell shocked, crimson red splattered onto their robes.

Noise enveloped them like a blanket, giving some privacy. Public places were the most private after all, and when everyone had settled, and everyone had a meal in front of them, he still waited. Only once the young master had broken his chopsticks, and moved to take the first sip of his soup, did Mercury speak again.

“I’m relieved,” he said calmly, eyeing the scion’s reaction as he leaned back with casual ease. “I almost killed you there.”

At that, the sect disciples froze again. “S-sir?” their leader asked. One hand was still on his chopsticks, but the other hovered on the hilt of his sword, shaking.

“See, I’m patient. But I have a bit of a temper,” he said, cracking his knuckles on the table. “And I was really upset when you insulted my friends. I put my honor on the line for them, you see? So what does that mean you did...?”

The man swallowed again, fear slowly blossoming in him. “I... showed you no face. I spat on your honor.”

"You poured soup over my honor," Mercury nodded. "Now, did you do so on your own? Of your own volition, young man?"

He grimaced, distorting his face. "Yes, sir," he said, looking aside, taking on the fault himself. He had to protect the sect at any cost.

But when he glanced at Mercury, he saw that the stranger's face had soured. That joviality had melted off, and he faced a stone cold... nothing. And then, he caught the foreigner's eyes.

Then he felt himself fall apart.

Enormity crashed down on him. A deep, unending ocean of silver. Clouds, a patchwork sky, an eye within an eye, a truth and a lie, a horrible knowledge that he was seen, known, undone and unmade. A book to be read, stared into wholly, a transparent thing like a pane of glass, a fragile thing, so surreal, a fake, flimsy thing, an illusion, a lie, a person.

And then it faded.

Sweat rolled down the young master's face. He was an adult. He was meant to be able to handle himself. But nothing the sect taught him had prepared him for *that*. To feel himself unmade and rewoven as the exact same. To know he could come apart and yet not. To be so utterly, entirely perceived, known, witnessed, unravelled.

His eyes were wide as he stared at the stranger. Someone so normal, and yet so vast. Enormous. Oceanic. It felt like he'd drowned, and was now back on his seat. His hand shook. He swallowed again.

Mercury tilted his head. "Did you do it yourself?"

"Yes, e-esteemed sir," the scion answered.

Despite everything, he was a brave, tough guy. Mercury frowned faintly, then sighed.

"Seriously, who put you up to this? <Answer>."

"Elder Bo Dan commanded it, esteemed sir." This time, the words tumbled out easily. There was no resistance, and his tongue felt feather-light in his mouth. Truth spilled forth like a waterfall.

"Why? <Answer>."

The man, for a moment, blinked, then nodded. "He wanted to force you into offering your services to the Lilac Skies sect. He would have made you produce gold for us, for as long as we could hold you."

Silence fell heavily, only interrupted by Zyl's snicker. "Well," the dragon hummed. "That didn't go so well, did it?"

Mercury drummed his remaining fingers on the table with a soft sigh. "Thank you for your honesty, scion of Lilac Skies. Eat, then leave. Cause me no more trouble. I've stained your honor, and you took my hand. You stained my honor, and I took your truth. All is equal. Sand on the beach, water in the ocean."

He waved his hands, dismissing the scion, and then faced his own bowl of noodles, eating calmly. There was some hesitation, then some eating sounds from his side, and then the shifting of seats and feet.

"Sorry you had to deal with that, Lucky," Mercury said with another sigh. He took out his detached hand, pressed it against his stump, and <Assimilated> it, mending the cut. It felt a bit numb for a few minutes, but as he moved his fingers, feeling returned to the digit.

The Storm's Raiment, his robe, lashed out across the ground and the table, even enveloping Lucky for a moment in thin fog. It drew away the moisture, the blood, and everything else, leaving things spotless.

Unlike Mercury, though, the bandit just seemed shocked. "Huh," he said. "I never expected that to happen to me," he noted drily. "That was... new."

"Not to you?" Mercury asked, tilting his head.

Lucky snapped back to himself, then laughed it off, scratching the back of his head. "Ah, don't mind it, don't mind it. Just a bit out of it. I'll sleep it off."

"They'll come for us again," Jean noted drily. "Sects are greedy, and this was like a slap in the face for their elder. They'll try to get even more from you."

Zyl snickered again. "I doubt they will," he noted gently, a faint smile playing on his lips.

"We'll take care of it tonight."

Jean flinched at that. "Take care of it?" she asked, worriedly. "You mean... slaughter them all?"

“What? No, goodness gracious, no!” Mercury said, vehemently shaking his head. “I’ll just politely threaten them or something. Butchery is not my go-to solution to problems!”

Brock gave his hand a pointed look.

Mercury frowned. “Butchery of *others*. A hand isn’t a big deal for me, see?” He flexed his fingers to demonstrate his healing. “Minor inconvenience, these days. No trouble. Not worth killing someone over, at all. But, well...” his eyes narrowed a little. “I can’t exactly let them go *unpunished*, so...”

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Night fell on Fuchsia City. Elder Bo Dan sat in his study, at his desk, looking over scrolls with fury in his face. He’d plotted and schemed and it had failed *spectacularly*. That idiot scion - he’d been demoted from core disciple to inner disciple for his grave mistake.

The elder had lost so much face in a single day. Failing to take care of a single, nameless foreigner? It was a pathetic display for one of their elites. But now, he had to double down. The only way to earn his respect back was to deal with the foreigner once and for all. To get him to work only for them, as a dedicated smith for, say, a decade or two, perhaps.

Huddled over plans as he was, he muttered to himself. The smith had gone too far. Crossed their bottom line with the humiliation. They had to retaliate, or lose their honor. “An assassin, perhaps...? No, too unsafe, too risky. We need something simple, make him slip. Perhaps an invitation to a tea ceremony...”

Whispers and plots left his lips unceasingly, pieces sliding together like those of a puzzle, when there was a faint knock on his study. The elder creased his brows. It was deep in the night, the moon hanging high. Pale light barely filtered in through his windows, casting long shadows among dusty scrolls.

Another knock from the door. Clicking his tongue, elder Bo Dan rose from his seat, straightened his back, clasped his hands behind his back, and strode to the door. Then, in a swift and graceful motion, he pulled it open. “You better have a good reason for disturbing me at this hour. What is-”

He paused. The words died in his throat as he saw *what* stood in front of him. That *thing* wasn’t human. It wore a mask with rings of fingers, reaching every inward and outward, fractal patterns of grasping force. It wore a crown of silver, and a woven robe of violent

storm. Lightning crackled along clouds black as night, and stygian metal enveloped brutal lengths of claw and fang.

The other figure was just as bad. A mask of billowing fire, consuming half its face. A creature covered in scales, dark horns from its head, fangs as iron, and wings of fiery death spread behind it.

A nightmare. It was a nightmare come true. What were they? Demons? Spirit beasts? Elder Bo Dan scrambled backwards, into his study, raising his voice, ready to cry out for the guards.

Then his lips moved.

And not a sound left them.

Silence hung heavy in the air, like metal. It choked the words before they left his throat, it choked the air in his lungs, freezing his vocal chords. The wind stopped howling. The crickets stopped chirping. The world fell into complete and utter quiet.

Bo Dan shivered, stumbling back further as the figures intruded on his study. They walked in casually, unbothered, eyeing the place as if it were an idle curiosity. Those eyes, red and purple, hungrily devouring everything, before landing on him again.

"Do you know why we are here?" the living storm growled. It took Bo Dan a moment to realize they were words - it simply faded into the crackle of lightning, noise buzzing with electric power. He breathed heavily, but shook his head, reaching for a drawer of talismans, when his hand froze.

His eyes trailed to the digit, and found it enveloped in liquid metal. It was cool, almost cold against his skin. He tried to pry his hand free, but it was like a vice grip.

"<Answer>," the Storm demanded, and Bo Dan crumbled.

"Yes," the word tumbled from him breathlessly. "Yes, I know. It is because of the outsiders in the city. The blacksmith and the painter. I did not know they had spirit-bonds, I did not know, I-"

The Fire breathed a huff of amusement, and heat crashed over the elder. A faint heat, like of a summer breeze, yet with the smell of ash and burnt hair. "Ignorance is a flimsy excuse, elder," it said drily, voice like a crackling fire.

"My sincerest apologies," the elder muttered, whisper-quiet. "I will never bother them again. I will stay out of their lives, the Lilac Skies sect will never-"

He stopped when the storm crackled. Thunder rumbled quietly, never leaving that isolated quiet of the world. "You will pay," it demanded.

"No, please, I will do anything! Don't kill me! I-"

There was a brief flash of lightning, smashing into the table next to him, latching onto the mercury that covered the ground, and coursing back to the storm. A warning not to speak out of turn? "No death," the Storm crackled, but its voice was sinister. "*Payment.*"

The elder's eyes widened. A... a way out! Instantly, he understood the lifeline, and reached for it with all his might. "Y-yes! Of course, honoured spirits. I will show you the sect archives, I- I-... if you give me a day, I can let you into the treasury, too! I do not have the key for it, I-"

"Archives," the fire snarled. "Your techniques will do. Your knowledge, as ours."

Instantly, Bo Dan noted. The sect's knowledge was a cheap price to pay for his own life. He might be punished, lashed even, but he would not die for this. He could make this trade. The metal hold on his hand faded, but he did not attempt to escape. Dutifully, the elder did as he was told.

He did not want to die, and so, he preserved his life. He paid. He led the spirits to the archive, and Storm and Flame took copies of everything. Not the deepest secrets, the ones only open to the sect master, but everything else. Copies of unique cultivation manuals, rubbings of ancient scriptures found in long-dead monks' inheritances, bestiaries, herbalism books, and so much more.

The sect held much knowledge, and they took all of it. It was not a theft - there were copies of everything. It wasn't irreplaceable, for their inner archives were still locked, but it was a *heavy* price to pay. Scriptures not even core disciples would ever all see, knowledge so easily claimed by Storm and Flame.

Some resistance was expected from the deacons in the library, but with the elder's words, that quickly disappeared. And so, Bo Dan found himself alive. Standing in the middle of a looted archive, more copying work to be done, preparations for lending unmade. But it could all be restored, and he *lived*.

“You have paid,” Storm crackled. Its electricity still grounded itself in the quiet metal, the thundercracks reaching the elder’s ear and no one else. “Your debt is cleared. Ensure you do not make new ones. Trade, if you wish, but trade fairly. Do not cross our bottom line again, for our mercy is fickle, elder.”

“Yes, honoured spirit. This one is grateful for your mercy and wisdom,” he said, bowing at the waist. “We will not cause your bonds trouble again.”

With another crackle of amusement, heat washed over him. Bo Dan closed his eyes as they dried out, the incandescence easily passing through his barrier, but otherwise harmless. When he opened his eyes again... they were gone. The masks, the Fire, the Storm... withdrawn like a cool summer breeze, leaving the elder there.

It was a mountain of work. A setback.

But he lived. He cultivated.

A deep breath came, and relief flooded his body. Even if he had to copy manuals for a year, Bo Dan cherished this moment. The mercy of spirits was rare, and their blessings rarer still.

He would, for his own safety, ensure that in Fuchsia, no one caused the foreigners trouble.

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Mercury appeared back in the basement of the inn, quickly taking off the mask, turning the Storm’s Raiment back into a white robe, and undoing the exaggeration of his monstrous features. Then, for a long moment, he and Zyl stared at each other.

Until they burst out laughing.

“Hahahaha! Spirit bond?!” Mercury laughed, leaning against a wall.

Zyl snickered in return. “Zazaza! I think he was about to have a heart attack. I’d feel almost bad, but...”

“But it was really funny,” Mercury nodded. “And we did get a whole library out of it.”

“I didn’t even use any intimidation Skills!” Zyl said with another laugh.

Mercury wrapped a hand around his boyfriend, ruffling the dragon’s hair with a smile. “Well, me neither. He must have just been genuinely scared.”

“Aren’t elders meant to be strong?” Zyl asked.

“I think so! Hah. Maybe not this one, specifically? Think he’s their chief strategist?” Mercury asked with a grin.

The dragon just laughed more in reply. “Zazaza! Didn’t work out so well for him, then.” He gave a long, relieved sigh, letting himself fall backwards onto the bed, arms spread wide. “I don’t usually like making people afraid, but... I do quite love stealing.”

“Now, now!” Mercury held up both his hands, stopping the dragons. “We didn’t steal anything. This was willingly given to us. At *worst* our crimes are blackmail and extortion.”

Zyl pouted adorably. “Those aren’t nearly as fun to endorse.”

“Ahahaha!” Mercury jumped at the dragon, pulling him into a hug. “You’re such a dummy,” he said, messing with the dragon’s hair some more, while Zyl gave undignified squawks.

“Hopefully we won’t run into any more trouble with the sect.”

“Do you think they’ll try to kill us tomorrow?” Zyl asked, tilting his head with a smile.

Mercury laughed, then nodded. “Yeah, probably. Hey, Juno!” he called into the empty room, only to see a pair of eyes open on his shadow.

“Yes, Mercury?” the wolf asked quietly.

The mopaaw grinned, then pulled open his robes like a shady drug dealer, letting scrolls upon scrolls, ancient tomes, manuals, technique-crystals and so much more pour out in an avalanche, quickly filling their room. “I’ll let you peruse this as much as you want if you look out for any assassins for me tomorrow.”

“I already look out for assassins, Mercury,” Juno said, rolling her eyes. “And you would already let me look through everything.”

This time, it was Mercury’s turn to pout. “Yes, you’re entirely correct. But this way, you’ll probably be less of a pain about it.”

At that, the wolf grinned, a wide smile of fangs in the darkness. “Indeed. Consider yourself safe, my liege,” she said, then sunk away before he even had time to complain. Zyl laughed at Mercury’s continued trouble with honorifics, only for the cat to pounce on him again, rubbing his scratchy beard all over the dragon’s face, to his loud complaints.

It was a calm, peaceful night. And no one, not a single party involved, would hold a grudge, right?