

Chapter 294: Litmus Test

Mercury opened his eyes roughly when the poison had been mostly metabolized. He held a hand to his head, feeling a dull ache still radiating out, the throbbing feeling like it rattled the roots of his teeth. Of course, all of that was just a byproduct of the poison. He'd seen the journey, but only perceived the interiority of the storage ring.

Could he have looked outside of it? Yes, he could, but then Kang would have probably noticed. That's why he was knocked out and Zyl wasn't, because the dragon didn't have his perception Skills. What a pain indeed.

He sighed softly, rubbing his head, even as Zyl hurried over. When the dragon leant down to check on him, Mercury shook his head with an apologetic smile. "Sorry about that," he said. "I didn't expect it to go so weirdly."

"Were you actually knocked out?" Zyl asked.

Shaking his head, Mercury answered honestly. "No, I wasn't. But I played along. It was clearly important to him, and the toxin was pretty strong. He probably made it specifically for me. I can tell that I've digested it and am stronger for it now."

And, indeed, Mercury's resistance to neurotoxins had increased. Especially soporific ones like this. He'd be even harder to put to sleep in the future - despite the fact that he already was a nightmare to stun.

Zyl pinched Mercury's nose, to which the mopaaw let out an undignified scream. "Buergh! What's that for?" he asked.

The dragon just smiled gently. "I'm glad you're okay. And I'm a little upset that I took a bath in acid for you."

"I think that was Kang's idea of a prank," Mercury hedged. "He seems a little..."

"Peculiar? Yeah, I gathered. You have a penchant for making friends with weirdos," Zyl chided humorously.

Mercury rolled his eyes. "Weirdos like yourself?" he asked.

Shamelessly, Zyl nodded instantly. “Weirdos like me,” the dragon confirmed. With a tousle of Mercury’s hair, he rose, extending to his full height and stretching a little. “So. We’re underground, right?”

For a moment, Mercury closed his eyes. His senses crawled out, glacially at first, then with a rapid expansion. He felt the magic in the air, tasted the qi, let the tapestry of the world whisper to him, listened to the shadows and the faint current of air movement that told him all about this world.

In an instant, he had the surrounding kilometers mapped out. He noted a few holes in his perception, where it abruptly cut off, probably the safe houses of other members more skilled at warding themselves off. He found a few kids nursing wounds in other bunkers. The mountain was a little like an anthill.

Dozens upon dozens of tunnels intersected, leading to groves with sources of food, public marketplace, and people who were all smiles. Everyone hid something. Mercury saw daggers, poisons, illusions, grenades. Even the little kids knew it. They worked for each other, but were ready to backstab at a moment’s notice.

And even when betrayed, people didn’t lose their smiles.

That was the oddest part. People would get knifed, and treat it like a game. They’d retreat to their safehouses, nurse their wounds, let the poison wear off, subsist off of fasting pills and bare morsels of food, then head right back into the snake’s den again.

The surface of the mountain was no different. The people there were older, looking like hermits or old monsters, but each and every one of them had the same aura about them. Mercury could judge people, after all, and everyone here smelled of treachery. They did it so openly, so honestly that it was almost impressive to see.

Honesty was abundant at the same time as betrayal. It was such an obvious contradiction that it left Mercury shellshocked for a moment. Then, he gathered himself and honestly answered Zyl’s question.

“Yes,” he said. “We’re underground. There’s lots of tunnels all around us, some of them spiked with traps. People here betray each other very casually, so don’t trust anything anyone says. We’ll have to look out for ourselves.”

That was the lesson he imagined Kang wanted to teach with this place. That, in order to make it in the world, you needed to be a little selfish. Well, Mercury thought he might be overdoing it on that lesson a little bit, but he also understood.

It was a cult, after all. Every single peak he'd seen was with its own issues. Mutilation was a factory for people to nurse their hatred of the world, and Slaughter encouraged kids to casually kill each other. Also, from what he had seen of the martial world, most people were ready to rapidly stab each other in the back.

Was this a good lesson to teach kids? Mercury was unsure. But he didn't see any corpses, strangely enough. So maybe, there was a bottom line to this place. Don't enter someone else's safehouse. If you stab them in the back, don't kill them. And, of course, in the end that meant that for people to coexist, they had to learn to accept betrayal and cooperate anyway.

In a way, was it telling them not to hold grudges? Mercury wondered about that.

Zyl looked toward the door, tilting his head slightly. It had been about a day since they came to the bunker, and the dragon had done nothing but meditate. Seeing him so calm was odd to Mercury, but he supposed that Zyl must be occupying himself somehow. He felt warm, as he always did, but a little sharper, too.

The dragon sighed softly as he looked at those tunnels. Then, he smiled. "I think I'll head out for a little," he said calmly.

"Why is that?" Mercury asked.

"You'll wait here for Kang, and he'll probably show up soon, won't he?" Zyl asked. "So, I don't want to see him. I'm not quite as gentle as you, Mercury. There are no flowers for me to tend here, and I don't feel like painting. In fact, if I see Kang right now, I fear I might be rather cross with him."

A wave of heat washed over Mercury - the kind that told him with absolute certainty that Zyl *meant it* when he said he'd be cross with Kang. It was the kind of heat that could have made his skin blister if it weren't so tempered. But the dragon quickly controlled himself again. His heartbeat quieted down to a reasonable sound, that of a human. His pupils went from slit to round.

And, with all his composure, Zyl gave Mercury a smile. "I know you're strong," he said. "I know you won't die. But I can't help but get scared. So, this once, I think I'd like to see what this peak is all about before I watch you torture yourself some more."

"It's hardly torture," Mercury said, a little defensively. Seeing Zyl's eyes, he softened up, though, sighing and nodding. "I understand," he amended. "It doesn't hurt me, but you worry anyway. Because you're a reasonable, kind person, right?"

Zyl huffed in amusement. "You really are the only one in the whole world who would call me *reasonable*, aren't you?"

At that, Mercury smiled and nodded. "I understand. My entirely average boyfriend, and me, the silly lil' guy you decided to date. If this is too much for you, I can stop," he offered.

"No." Zyl shook his head. "No, I don't want you to do that. You don't have to hold back or to limit yourself for me. But for a moment, I want some space. We've had a few calm days since you reforged your body, and I think I'd like another calm day before facing Kang again."

"Okay," Mercury said.

"Okay?"

The mopaaw nodded. "Okay," he repeated. "I get it. You need a bit of time to digest it all. Go out there. These people are... well, not weak, but they can't hurt you. So don't be too harsh on them, alright? Think of them as kids. Many of them are, anyway."

Zyl smiled at that. "Merciful Mercury," he chided. "But yes, yes, I'll play nice," Zyl said. Then, he faced the door, taking a deep breath. He raised his hand, giving a small wave. Everything he needed to say had been said. Mercury understood. That made him happy. "Well then," Zyl said. "See ya later."

"See you, Zyl. Love you. Stay safe."

"Love you too. Will do," the dragon said. Then he waved, then stepped outside.

Promptly, a landmine exploded under his feet.

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The dragon did, indeed, head out into the peak, after shaking off a bit of dust and complaining about his slightly singed suit. It was a rather silly sight, Mercury thought. He strictly kept that much to himself, though. If Zyl heard, he'd certainly lecture him about it, and Mercury wasn't quite in the mood for that.

In fact, he felt a little annoyed. He had been kidnapped, and frankly felt a little bit entitled to be annoyed about that. Not that he was a kid. Catnapped? Catnapped. Even then, it wasn't so much that he was catnapped and more so that he let himself be catnapped. But that didn't change the fact that he'd been catnapped!

Therefore, as was his right, he decided to be angry about it. In fact, he prepared to give Kang a right scolding! Once the man actually showed up, that was.

Because, for now at least, Mercury was completely and utterly... alone. In a hut in a dark, damp cave. With landmines around him.

The mopaaw sighed softly, then snickered. There was really nothing for him to do. Well, he could think of a few things - he always could. Even right now, parts of his mind were experimenting with the crystalline ring of powdered mana in his core, and how that interfaced with the outside world, and how his origin qi pooled in his dantian.

It was all fun to observe, but it wasn't fully occupying his mind right now. In fact, what he decided to actually pay attention to was a long-neglected Skill of his. A Skill that no one else in the world had. <Shop>. Capitalism's last gift for its wayward slave.

He shuddered at the memory, even. Urgh. His old job had truly been a pain. His unique Skill had done well enough for him, but it hadn't saved anyone when it really mattered. And he rarely earnt gold when not killing someone. Since he didn't particularly enjoy mass murder, he was sort of poor?

Richer than he had ever been at the start of his journey, but not particularly rich, really. His <Shop> also adjusted prices, so he could only see how things would go. Especially with the new level.

With a small sigh, he opened up the window.

As he had grown used to, it was large. Full of slots and items and prices and categories, with search functions that weren't quite intuitive. But Mercury was also no longer who he used to be. An instant was all it took for him to see, notice, and categorize hundreds of items on the list. He looked through more, remembering their details.

Potions, herbs, weapons, armor, materials, gear. Most of it was good, things that would take a space in physical reality. <Shop> didn't only offer those, though - just *mostly*. Given its near infinite amount of offers, that meant that there were plenty of other options, too. A few were still far out of his reach - like an additional life.

Yep. It was there, on offer. A full revive, full health, entirely restored to perfect well-being, for the cheap price of one-billion gold. One billion.

Nine zeroes.

Mercury snorted at the number and moved on with his life. That was silly. He didn't need a second life. He was already doing just fine in terms of surviving. No, what interested him far more was what the upgrade to level 2 brought his <Shop>. It'd sat at level one ever since he'd come to this world, after all.

[<Shop lv. 2>: The level-up has granted the individual access to more permanent self-enhancement options. Affinities have also been added to the menu. Most importantly, the user is now granted additional income streams based on achievements. Achievement-related gold will be stored and accumulated until harvested in a similar fashion to <Skill Point Generation>.]

Oh. Huh. That kind of solved most of his issues with it.

Wait. Stop, no, nope. He was not going to celebrate before he knew what he had to do in order to actually get the gold. So, he asked.

"System, can you give me an example for potential achievements?" Mercury asked.

[Acknowledged. Possible achievements include sale of real goods, exploitation of real workers, ownership and leasing of land-]

Gosh dangit. He knew it. He knew it, damn it! That Skill was evil! Eeeeeeevil!

[-or causing significant improvement to a person or community.]

Okay, maybe he could find it in his heart to forgive the Skill.

Who was he kidding, no he couldn't. He'd still be annoyed and grumble about it any chance he got. So many cool Skills and he got saddled with capitalism of all things. It wasn't the worst, because, well, he was kind of creating value from nothing, but still. There was something frustrating about it.

So, he'd still probably not use it overly much. But he'd let the money stack up, and one day... one day he'd withdraw it all and then run that market dry. The extra life didn't look super appealing to him, but there were plenty of cool things. More inventory slots, upgrades to his mana capacity, pricey enhancements to his stats and affinities. It was good.

Very good, even. But not good enough to occupy him right that second. So, instead, he focused on mana again.

The ring rotating in his core had grown, somehow. Apparently, some of the outside mana was dragged in by him, almost subconsciously. The streamers of mana had grown sharp again, but were currently still so ethereal they didn't interact with the real world.

His bracelet of mana, however, was absolutely a spinning saw of mana and could cut through almost anything. Curious how that worked. Mercury smiled softly, pushing and prodding the rapidly rotating crystals with his mind. He considered eating them, for a moment.

That'd let him absorb the mana. But, at the same time, he could clearly control it even outside his body. Which was funny. It kind of made regeneration less important.

Not unimportant, of course, because the mana in his core was easier to control, denser, and generally more useful for spells, but still. He could supplement his mana as much as needed. And if he ever ran out, <Grain of Infinity> was an excellent power source. It had grown even denser inside his chest these days, a tight-knit ball of unending energy.

Suffice to say, mana wasn't Mercury's primary concern anymore. He probably had enough for almost anything he wanted to do. Far more importantly than that was the fact that he lacked many spells. He had <Magic>, which let him make mana of virtually any affinity that he understood - nature, ice, shadow, air, fire, and so forth - but he didn't understand them all, nor did he know many spell-patterns.

Which is precisely what he decided to focus on, buying a book on patterns from his <Shop> for a thousand gold. Turns out he did use it in the end. How silly.

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When Kang Tae-Yoon came to pick Mercury up, there was a somewhat significant surprise that crashed his day. The peak master knocked on the door to the safehouse. That much was already impolite to do, but it was far better than barging in uninvited, and he had set up the rules that way for a reason. This was his peak, and he wanted safe houses to be safe.

Therefore, he knocked. Politely.

The door swung open, and darkness spilled forth like a tide.

All around him, the shadows lengthened, then deepened. They crawled up the cave walls, up his skin, turning it all black. Like writhing tattoos of ink, they crawled across the walls, the door, his hand, his face. They crawled into his eyes, suffocating them, into his mouth and nose, almost physical.

He felt the darkness claw at him. It suffocated his senses, his sight swallowed whole. His fingers went cold, then numb, then ceased to exist at all. From one blink to the next, the world disappeared into a landscape of inky blackness and terror. For a long breath that brought only sticky darkness into his lungs, Kang thought he might suffocate.

Then, as if a lightbulb turned on, the shadows swapped back to the floor, into their two-dimensional versions. “Whoops,” Mercury said, holding open the door for the handsome peak-leader. “Didn’t mean for that one to get out. Sorry, was working on my spells.”

Spells. Kang Tae-Yoon shivered at the thought. Sorcery was, apparently, far more terrifying than he’d thought. Maybe it was just his imagination playing tricks on him, but when the darkness eclipsed his world, for a moment it had felt as though there were beastly teeth only moments from his throat. A single wrong breath away from spilling his blood.

Ahhh. How *thrilling*.

Kang’s blood howled in his veins. His hair fell into his face, lightly dampened by sweat. He felt adrenaline rush through his veins, and then the man in front of him even apologized. What perfect politeness. What beautiful betrayal.

Smiling brightly, Kang nodded. “No trouble, Mercury,” the peak master of Honest Treachery reassured his guest and student. “I will simply take it as revenge for the way I brought you here.”

“Okay, I have to admit I was conscious the whole time, but I promise I didn’t peek,” Mercury said.

At that confession, Kang raised his eyebrows. “You were conscious?”

“Not technically,” Mercury replied with a bit of confused hesitation in his voice. “But I don’t exactly need my brain to think, you see?”

“What?”

Mercury stared at the confused man for a while. Then, he sighed. In a swift motion, his skin turned silvery liquid, returning to the metal it was formed from. The top of his head simply levitated upwards, his brain detaching from him. And then, his lips moved anyway.

“See?” he said, casually. “Unnecessary.”

“Terrifying,” Kang said, still staring at the floating organ, even as it settled back into Mercury’s skull, reconnecting with his nervous system, then melding shut as if nothing had ever happened. “Your reforging is quite... bizarre.”

At that, the rogue cultivator in front of him smiled brightly. “I like bizarre,” he said with a happy shrug. “Nothing wrong with being a little weird. Really, I think it’s one of my strengths. Being how I am lets me do things others would struggle with.”

Kang slightly tilted his head, then nodded. “I can see that,” the peak master admitted. “I am interested in seeing how your unique physiology will influence your cultivation. Are you willing to learn from me today?” he asked.

“Sure thing,” Mercury said, nodding in reply.

At that, another smile blossomed on the peak master’s head. “Amazing,” Kang said. Then, he pulled out a knife, and stabbed it into Mercury’s eye. “Please, survive, my student.” His words were so sincere and sad it almost brought a tear to Mercury’s other eye.

Almost.

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The following conflict was brutal and bloody. Kang was a ruthless fighter, mixing running and chasing. He lured Mercury into traps and ambushed. He stabbed him with hidden weapons, paralyzing poisons and blinded him with bright illusions.

Mercury was stabbed in the eye, then had his legs exploded. He was trapped in a net, electrocuted, trapped in an illusion formation that dealt psychic damage to him with images of his loved ones - not metaphorical psychic damage, but the kind that made his brain leak from his ears.

Sounds rattled his very cells, and when he hesitated, the very walls themselves would crash inwards and crumble his bones.

But, of course, none of that *really* hurt him at this point. When he lost limbs, they reformed. Liquid metal sprouted from him, and his body literally regrew from <Mercury>. Crushed bones snapped back into place, then hardened, and the next instance did less damage. He felt no pain, all of it washed away by <Babbling Brook>.

Really, it made him all feel like some kind of terminator. He could shapeshift and flow through narrow passages, never losing his way because of <Itinerant>. He could crush illusions in moment, overloading the formations with his <Mindblossom>. His body was tough to injure at all, and regenerated in mere moments with <Mind over Matter>.

Trap by trap, he simply stepped through. And he was a good sport about it, which made Kang laugh. Whenever the peak master appeared, Mercury got hurt. Sometimes more, sometimes less. He'd lose eyes, or receive stabs to his skull. Sometimes the knives skidded off his metal bones, sometimes they pierced right through, sometimes he wrapped his hands in <Weapon Intent> and caught them.

But it was bloody. Every step he took, Mercury bled for. He had a lot of blood to bleed, of course, with a lot more blood saved up, but it was still a strange experience. To be so thoroughly hurt and yet unhurt. He tilted his head at the lesson.

Then, one attack landed.

And it hurt.

Qi roared and bit through his defenses. It was another dagger to the eye, one he had taken a dozen off, but this time it burnt. It stung his mind, burnt his consciousness, and singed the wound into place against the reformed metal of his body.

Mercury grunted with pain as it radiated through his nerves and mind. <Babbling Brook> triggered, dragging it away and stifling it in moments. His calm returned. Mercury breathed in, then out.

One moment to the next, he changed how he approached things. He'd been casually playing along, and this was probably some form of limit test. So, if Kang wanted to see, then he could see.

<Greater Perception> interlocked with <Tapestry> and <Worldsense> as Mercury sunk into ihn'ar. His sight became a mess of strings and connections, blurring colours and fleeting images. Kang seemed to be in a dozen places at once, the peak master's illusions perfectly lifelike to his qi-based senses.

But that was not all Mercury had. <Rainfall> expanded outward, wrapping the world into an ethereal storm. The illusions were torn apart. In an instant, the caves experienced erosion. Drizzling rivers of rainwater dug through rubble, destroyed formations, and turned traps into nothing but shrapnel.

Kang was trapped by a gust of wind, suddenly immobilized by a world that had lost all colour. The Stifled Silence rested atop Mercury's head. He breathed in, then out, stepping in front of the peak master, holding his bleeding eye that still hadn't healed.

And then, Kang raised his hands. "Peace!" he called, wearing a bright smile. "Let's call it here!"

Mercury tilted his head. He breathed in, then out. The pain ebbed. His rage was stilled by the flowing waters. "What did you do?"

Smiling brightly, the peak master nodded. "Tested your limits! Now that I know what hurts you, we can work on that, right? Ah, before that, though, it's only fair for you to hurt me as well." Kang smiled. "Hey, Mercury, wanna gouge out my eye?"

The mopaaw just shook his head. He breathed one more time, then dropped his Skills, letting the peak master land gently on his feet.

"Seriously," Mercury whispered out loud. "Why are all these cultists such fricken weirdos?"

"Irony much?" Juno snarked from his shadow.

Mercury pointedly ignored the wolf.