

Chapter 276: Next Stop

About two hours later, Mercury gently apologized to an old, balding chef for the delay in his opening times. The old man grumbled a bit, but eventually handed over two pots that were worn down and rusty for Mercury to take care of, which he swiftly did.

No one from the Lilac Skies sect came to bother him anymore. In fact, most of the disciples now avoided him, actively taking wide births around his shop. Apparently, that was the instruction that the sect leader had passed down: To just not interact with him whenever possible. And to treat him with respect when it had to happen.

Mercury hummed happily to himself as he plied his trade. There was something rather meditative about smithing, after all, and working on so many sentimental pieces made him happy. This was going to mean far more to people than a sharper sword, he noticed. And for the first time, he realized another aspect of why Yasashiku had made him forge nails over anything else.

They were used to build things. *That* was the point of a crafter. To make stuff, rather than destroy it. Swords were cool, yes. They were flashy, often beautiful and appreciated by the powerful. Weapons needed to be well-made more so than most other things. They were people's pride and joy.

But they were still weapons.

Making a sword inherently held the promise that it would be used to hurt someone. That it would be swung, and hold up better than another sword. That it'd cut through bristle and bone, through skin and flesh. Sever life itself.

And that was less nice a thought than Mercury expected. In fact, it made him frown a bit to think of it. So, he was rather happy that it wasn't what he'd been made to do.

Sure, nails *could* be used to hurt someone. They were even rather common to use in torture. But 99% of the time, they were rather simple things. Meant to hold a structure together. To make sure someone had a roof over their head, and walls around them. Nails were a promise of safety.

Humming, Mercury brought down his will in a final quick blow, then spun the pot in his ghostly hands. He could have used his regular hands for it, but by now he was rather used to

doing it with <Force of the Hecatoncheires>. It was a bit of a chore to get used to having hands again, really.

Mercury chuckled to himself at that as he stepped outside of his trusty log. With a small movement, he handed the repaired pot back, and collected his payment, then took the next project from him to work on - this one a noodle roller. Who'd have thought that one day, he'd be *complaining* about having hands, eh? Surely he was meant to be complaining about how bad it was not to have them!

<Force of the Hecatoncheires> truly was a wonderful quality of life Skill. The ability to grip and move things was amazing. The Skill even provided tactile feedback - but only when he allowed it to! Which meant he could, technically, use it to grab noodles from soup with his little ghost fingers and not even get them feeling wet or icky.

The simple ability to touch things without having them rub off on his digits was incredible. Something that human hands simply couldn't emulate. His ghost hands were always clean, always free of dirt and debris. Which was a wonderful advantage.

Retreating into the log, he took the noodle roller apart with deft movements. Usually, he'd have needed an engineering skill for that, but he felt the mastery simply flow into <Magical Metallurgy>, and his understanding of the machine was rapidly enhanced by all his learning Skills. Namely, in this case, <Perceived Ease>, <Fast Learner>, <Greater Perception>, <Lucidity>, <Tapestry> and <Unravel>.

If understanding things were a competition, Mercury would have been winning.

Shaking his head softly, he found the part of the machine that was causing trouble. One of the gears on the internal mechanism had broken a spoke, rusted from some water getting inside. He gingerly picked it out - again, ghost hands. Truly incredible.

Then, with a bit of <Unravel> and <Magical Metallurgy>, he took off the rust, and fused the missing piece back on. Then he placed it back inside, checked the mechanism, frowned as the gear was faintly too small, and sighed. With a bit of scrap, melted down and coating the gear in an alloy, he fixed that defect, too, then slotted it back in its place.

When the machine worked well, Mercury nodded to himself, sealed the mechanism back up - waterproof this time - and included an easier access point that didn't require cutting the machine open.

Once he returned that, someone else handed him another piece to work on - a dented chestplate. Mercury raised an eyebrow. "Saved my gran's life in the last war," a young woman replied with a shrug. "Thought with a repair it might save mine."

Smiling faintly, Mercury shook his head. "I'd recommend you simply don't go to war, young lady."

She snickered at that, then shook her head. "No can do. Someone's gotta fight the right battles."

At that, Mercury tilted his head. "Tell you what," he said casually. "Come back in the eve, when I'm closing up, and I'll have another look. In exchange, rather than pay, you can simply tell me what that fight is about."

With that, he handed the armor back to her, even as her eyes narrowed. "Fine," the woman eventually said. "If you're one to take a story over coin, I won't refuse."

Watching her walk off, Mercury shook his head again. With a small smile, he took a kitchen knife that needed sharpening and a new handle from another old man who grumbled about the youth these days. As old people often do.

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"So it's a blood feud," Mira Joo explained slowly.

"What's that?" Mercury asked, tilting his head.

The young woman huffed at that, her raven hair bouncing from the motion. "You really aren't from around here, huh?" she asked, fixing cold, calm blue eyes on him, she eventually smiled. "A blood feud is when two families agree to fight until one is wiped out, basically."

"That sounds harsh," Mercury hummed.

Mira nodded with a shrug. "It is," she said simply, not denying it. "But that's the cycle of violence. They kill someone, we kill someone in return, they kill someone in return, we kill someone... You see how it escalated."

Her almost casual dismissal of it all made Mercury bristle a bit, but at the same time, he did understand. Violence had a way of desensitizing people. At some point, what was another life lost, right? He sighed, though, feeling frustrated.

“Alright,” he said. “Tell me about it.”

Zyl chuckled, and Mercury gave the dragon a small glare. In response, his boyfriend just held up his hands placatingly. “Didn’t say anything!” Zyl protested. Still, Mercury narrowed his eyes at the amused dragon for a moment, before turning back to Mira, and gesturing for her to talk.

The woman gave a soft nod at that. “Some hundred years ago,” she started, “the Joo clan and the Yung clan were close allies. Our ancestors were close companions, having fought alongside one another in the martial world. They both founded clans, and went on to have good relations. Until, of course, one day, the Yung clan’s young master killed the Joo clan’s young lady.”

Mercury blinked. “... Just like that? Like, was it recreational?”

She shrugged. “Not like anyone remembers. It simply escalated from there. It doesn’t really matter, anyway, since things simply went on from there. The Joo clan’s elders were outraged and demanded blood, the Yung clan refused, we attacked an outpost, they attacked back, so on and so forth.”

Her expression at the retelling was almost boring. Like it was... routine, at this point, to just occasionally go out and murder someone? “Have you ever considered stopping?” Mercury asked.

“Oh, sure,” Mira said, then raised an eyebrow. “But have you tried convincing the elders of that? No, that would be a huge loss of face. We either win or die, at this point.”

Mercury frowned. “That seems kind of sad.”

Mira narrowed her eyes. “What do you know, hm? Has your family ever received so grave an insult?”

“I don’t have a family,” Mercury replied calmly. That made her face somehow both fall and tense up, as if trapped between sympathy and mockery.

“My... apologies,” she eventually decided on. Mercury couldn’t quite read her tone from it, but that was fine. Calmly, he nodded, then got up, and took her armor.

“Accepted. I will be repairing this for you. Then, I may pay your family a visit.”

"Knew it," Zyl whispered smugly, and Mercury shot him a glare. Very quickly, the dragon snickered and took a few steps back, outside Mercury's immediate reach. The mopaaw, of course, was undeterred, ruffling his hair with <Force of the Hecatoncheires> for the grave insult he gave, to Zyl's incredible horror. The dragon spluttered, and instantly went about fixing his hair as Mercury turned back to Mira.

The woman eyed the two of them with some amount of confusion. "Pay my family a visit?" she asked calmly. "Why?"

"Because I dislike blood feuds. So, I'll stop it," Mercury said simply.

When Mira started sputtering about how he couldn't do that, how age-old grudges weren't so easily buried, Mercury simply shrugged and headed into Logston, to little Pandora. There, he heated the armor, forged away the dent, added some extra steel and alloyed it on with his Skills to preserve uniform thickness of the armor.

Once it was finished, Mira had calmed down a bit in the outside world, though she was kind of just staring out a window. Her eyes were glassy, even when her voice had been so calm this entire time. What a sad fate it was, to be born into a martial world like this.

"Here," Mercury said, handing her the mended chestplate. It was forged from cold-iron, which was hard to replicate, but Mercury did have a small stash of it - courtesy of the Lilac Skies sect who had made a truly generous donation to his cause. They did demonstrate their righteousness, after all, in the most truthful and upright way they knew how: involuntary monetary donations.

Mira turned it over and stared at the piece of metal in her hands. "It's... perfect," she said slowly. "How?"

Mercury shrugged. "I fixed it," he said, as if that explained everything.

"You would do this in exchange for just a story?" she asked, her eyes wavering slightly.

Another shrug. "Sure," Mercury said. "Depends on the story, of course."

"In that case," Mira said slowly, turning over the armor in her hands. "I'm sure our elders would welcome you eagerly..."

Snickering to himself, Mercury nodded. "Right," he said. "They probably would."

"I hereby extend a formal invitation for you to visit the Joo clan's family grounds, esteemed smith," the young woman said with a small bow to him, just a few degrees but hinged at the waist.

"Stand, stand," Mercury said, waving her off. "I humbly accept your invitation. When are you leaving this city for them?"

"Three days from now," Mira provided. "Noon."

Mercury smiled sagely, then nodded. "I will meet you at the gate, scion of the Joo clan."

Taking his words as a dismissal, which they admittedly were, Mira turned around, then headed out of the inn. Mercury's eyes slowly drifted to Zyl, who was very casually leaning back in a chair, legs crossed, resting his chin on an arm.

"Do you have to look so dashing when you're teasing me?" Mercury asked, rolling his eyes.

That made Zyl snicker again, but the dragon quickly composed himself. "Of course, my love," he explained with a saccharine smile. "For if I were less dashing, you might think to retaliate."

"Yes, fine, I'm getting involved in conflicts that are none of my business again," Mercury admitted with a sigh, running a hand through his hair.

"And I love that about you," Zyl said with a gentle smile, wrapping him in a hug. "If you didn't, I don't think we would have gotten this close. I'm happy you choose to involve yourself with people."

Mercury groaned slightly, but still leaned into the hug, wrapping his own arms around Zyl.

"Good," he said, "cuz I don't plan on stopping anytime soon."

"Better not," Zyl said with a warm smile. "We might get bored if you don't stick your head into every single conflict you can find."

That made the mopaaw laugh, and he enjoyed the hug for a few more seconds. Then, finally, he slowly pulled away. "What will Min think when we tell him?" Mercury said with a small sigh.

"He may be devastated," Zyl said, brushing some of Mercury's hair out of his face. "But it is a sacrifice I am willing to make."

Once more, Mercury snickered, then gave a soft sigh, resolving to tell the merchant tomorrow. Surely it'd go okay.

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Min dropped the pot he was holding, ceramic within inches of shattering on the floor, before Mercury caught it with his telekinesis. "You are what?!" the merchant demanded in shock.

Smiling apologetically, Mercury repeated himself. "I'm going to go along to the Joo family grounds in order to try to stop their blood feud with the Yung family," he repeated himself.

The merchant broke out in splutters in reply to that. No no! This couldn't be! His newest source of revenue would dry up so quickly?! The sheer horror of it! "Come now, saviour..." he tried. "Surely there must be better ways for you to spend your time."

Tilting his head softly, Mercury asked. "Really? What ways would that be?" And instantly, the sweat along Min's back grew freezing.

What a dangerous question! Laced with poison. He should have expected nothing less of his saviour, he supposed. The man had been nothing but shrewd and ruthless until now. A fierce warrior, one who was so far above the others he had the luxury of choosing mercy when needed. But even then, getting involved in a feud between clans...

"I cannot recommend this, saviour. You may put yourself in danger!"

At that, Mercury just laughed, and Min knew he had lost his chance. "Danger?" the mysterious cultivator asked, a faint smile playing along his lips. "Friend Min, I don't mind danger. If I lose my head over this, so be it. But it is the duty of the righteous to stand in the way of bloodshed, is it not?" he asked.

Righteous? Min almost laughed. If that was what it meant to be righteous, then all the sects in the land must have been underworldly! Hah! No, that was not righteousness. To be righteous was to act with justification - to shed blood over grievances, rather than for greed.

But, then again, what were grievances? How easily could they be engineered?

Righteousness was acting in the sun, that was all. Min knew that. The righteous sects were just as ready to bleed anyone dry as the cults. Min frowned, then looked Mercury up and down once more. "Fine then, saviour. I see I won't be changing your mind on this," he said, looking aside.

"Come now, Min," Mercury said gently, placing the valuable earthware he had caught down on the merchant's rug. "Don't be so glum."

"This one would not dare be glum around his esteemed saviour," Min said, cupping his fist and bowing, deeply. But he could not hide the frustration. Looking at Mercury, the way he acted, was as if to be a shadow staring at the sun. Min was not an *unkind* person, but he certainly wasn't good, either. He was happy to fleece, to negotiate, to run people for as much as they were worth.

In short, he was kind of a jerk. Not enough of one to be worthy of death, surely. His business was perfectly legal in every way, of course. Merchants needed to be somewhat fair, for good will was a currency too. One he wanted to leverage against Mercury.

And one he failed to leverage.

"Sure," the mopaaw said, waving him off. "You're allowed to be angry with me. I know you wanted to earn more money from me. That's why you haven't been asking for the monks I asked your help in seeking."

Min's blood froze. Mercury continued relentlessly.

"I can forgive that. In fact, I understand. You're a merchant. You saw an opportunity in me. That's why you tried to stick around. And I'm okay with that. You did me some small services, I did you some. But to frame it as a betrayal for me to leave... that's a bit audacious of you," he hummed. Min shrunk away under his gaze. There was a way that those words instilled guilt into him.

"Saviour, I didn't mean to-"

"You keep calling me saviour, Min," Mercury said. "Yet you don't treat me as one. I even told you not to call me that, yet you keep doing it. And again, I can forgive that. It makes me bristle, but that's fine. Yet you use that word as a cudgel, and now, you must stop. There need not be any bad blood between us, merchant Min. You have told me you are a salesman, and that is precisely what you've been."

Those words hit harder than any lash. Min had, in a way, betrayed his saviour for profit. It was a small betrayal, but a betrayal nonetheless, and to hear it told to him so plainly... he hung his head in shame. "This one understands, esteemed cultivator," Min said, bowing his head.

Mercury tilted his head, then smile and turned away. "Good," he said, no longer facing the merchant. "If you understand, then do better next time. I have given you a lesson. Do not disgrace me by forgetting it."

And then, before the merchant answered, his saviour was gone. A faint gust of wind was all that remained of the man who had so casually disappeared with a single step. Min was left alone, on his carpet of wares that suddenly felt so dirty.

He grit his teeth, and wiped his eyes. "Damn it all," he muttered to himself. "Damn it."

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Sitting down in the tavern, Mercury wore his hat. He did not want to be seen, for a little while, so he enjoyed the feeling of cloth layers spilling down his shoulders like a waterfall. He closed his eyes, simply listening to the world, the chatter in the background, the noise of the kitchen, sizzling pans and good-smelling food.

He breathed in and then out. Let it all wash over him. For a long time, he felt like a stranger in a world not quite meant for him... until the noise of footsteps approached. A small scraping noise entered his ears from the table in front of him, and Mercury opened his eyes, seeing the muffled silhouette of the innkeeper through the veil.

"Soup," the old man said, simply, with a warm smile.

Mercury stared at the bowl for a long moment. His heart beat in his chest, and he let out a shaky breath. "What did I-"

"You need it," the innkeep said, nodding. "I can tell when someone needs soup, lah." He tapped the side of his head with a wink. "And you need soup. Eat, eat. Don't keep me waiting."

"But-"

"Ayaya, you foreigners, always so whiney. If someone gives you soup, you eat the soup! Nothing about deserving or undeserving. You've been good customer! Always pay on time, resolve things neatly, draw in more customers. Even when trouble found you, it was clean! No dead bodies, and you even scrub away the blood! Sir, you been the best cultivator ever to visit my establishment."

The innkeep beamed at Mercury, smacking the table hard enough to make the bowl jump. At his words, the mopaaw couldn't help but smile. With a slow movement, he took off the hat, and nodded slowly. "Alright. Thank you, sir."

"You call me old Kan, cultivator."

Mercury snickered, then nodded again. "Thank you, old Kan. You can call me Mercury."

Old Kan beamed once more, sitting across from him for another minute, and watching as Mercury ate the soup. Mercury enjoyed every spoonful, the broth, the vegetables, the not-quite-tofu were all lovely. Soon, he'd wolved down the meal, and asked for seconds, which made old Kan laugh out loud.

"Good man!" he praised. "Good man, good customer. Will miss you when you're gone. Come visit again! There'll always be a place for you at old Kan's!"

And that promise, made with a man who asked so little of him, made Mercury smile again. It was nice, after all, to hear that one did enough. That simple courtesy paid off. And Mercury did like hearing it.

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The next day he checked in on the bandits again. It was already afternoon when Mercury dared to head outside, when the angry rays of the sun had dulled, while construction was still ongoing - though winding down. He found the building site where Jean, Lucky and Brock were being put through the wringer.

All three of them wore head protection. Lucky was running back and forth, bringing tools to more experienced people. A forewoman barked orders at Jean from atop a building, telling her where to raise walls, and she hastily stomped the ground, matching her directions, sweating as she worked. Brock seemed the most relaxed, simply carrying around pillars and steel girders. Anything heavy was simply laid on his shoulders and brought from place to place.

Mercury took a long moment to watch from across the street, smiling faintly with his arms crossed in front of him as he leaned against a wall. With every passing minute, more of the building rose from the ground. Stone wreathed around, foundations formed, wooden pillars were erected, nails driven into it, spanning walls.

People scaled up the supports, carving and refining them, layering on paint with large brushes and giant leaps. The beastkin were cultivators too, some stronger and some weaker, with only a few mortals. Amusingly, the forewoman in charge of it all, was an entirely mundane wolf-woman, though she had such an air of authority it would have been impossible to guess.

“What’chu fuckin’ gawkin at over there!” she barked at Mercury.

He simply tilted his head, then pointed at himself in an unspoken question. “Yeah, you, cultivator! Never seen someone do an honest day of work in yer immortal feckin’ life?” she demanded, and more heads turned to him.

Some of them looked afraid, others seemed to recognize him, and when Jean looked over, she gave a radiant smile and a wave. Mercury waved back, and the forewoman stared at the ex-bandit in shock. “Oh damn, you know him?!”

“Yeah, he got me this job,” Jean said with a smirk.

Instantly, her expression shifted into one of glee. “Well, come over ‘ere then! You brought us some damn fine workers, hah! Needed to get their asses in gear, but by now they’re doing real well, cultivator man.”

Mercury smiled, lifted off the wall, and casually strolled over. “Glad to hear it,” he said, speaking much more quietly than the forewoman, but having his voice reach her all the same. “I hope they haven’t caused you too much trouble.”

“Hah! No more than expected. No more than I did when I started,” she said with a laugh, then quickly snapped her head to the side. “HEY! Who said you can slack?! Get your lazy fuckin’ bones in gear, and put that helmet back on! Safety first!!” she barked.

Snapping to attention, the worker placed her helmet back on her head, and nodded eager. “Safety first!” she yipped.

Then, the forewoman turned to Mercury again. “So. Your kids are doin’ well, cultivator-man. C’mon, get a helmet and lift something. We can yap as we work.”

With a small smile, Mercury nodded. He didn’t mind. After all, he was taking her valuable time, so helping them work was nice. Though he refused the helmet, saying nothing here could kill him. The forewoman did only accept that once he had assured her in a legally binding way that they weren’t liable for any injuries of his.

Moving along with them, Mercury straightened out a bit of wood by simply asking the grain to shift. He bent nails back into shape, caught one falling worker before he got injured, and used his telekinesis to great effect in lifting things to higher floors. Within the hour, they'd finished the skeleton of the building, and the forewoman clapped. "That's it for the day!!" she barked the order. "Good work, everyone! Drop your things, shift's over!"

"Safety first!!" the crew responded, handing in their helmets and clocking out one by one.

Eventually, that left Mercury with Jean, Lucky and Brock, as well as a good chunk of knowledge on how they'd been doing. In between orders, the forewoman had been rather accommodating of his questions, especially when she saw how efficiently he worked.

Apparently, that was the easiest way to win over anyone on a construction crew: getting work done. Jean gave him a smile, wiping some remaining sweat from her forehead.

"Esteemed cultivator! Any particular reason you've visited us at work?"

Mercury smiled and nodded. "I wanted to check in on you before leaving the city. Have you been doing well?"

Lucky's jaw dropped. "Wait, what?!" he asked. "You'll be leaving?"

"We will be, me and Zyl," he nodded with a small smile. "No one here knows anything about the Skyflame Monks." It was true - they weren't mentioned once in the entire library of the sect. Him and Juno had stayed up all night checking each scroll and book diligently.

"Damn," Brock said. "We'll be missing you."

"To think you were scared to death of me a week ago," Mercury said with a chuckle. "Well, I'm glad you came around."

Jean nodded with a smile, hanging her uniform over her shoulder. "Well, it's true. You got us in here, paid off our bounties, and found us a job that pays well. And we were nothing but whiny along the way. But people have been... nice. Surprisingly so."

"First time no one's tried to shank me," Brock said with a huff.

"The beds are a bit hard, but I will manage," Lucky said jokingly.

Smiling, Mercury nodded. "I'm glad, then. You'll be safe by yourselves?"

"We'll be fine, cultivator," Lucky said, scratching his head with a grin. "Where are you headed?"

"The Joo family estate," Mercury said casually.

And this time, Lucky's face fell. His mouth dropped open. "T-the Joo family?" he stuttered carefully. "I- uh, are you... sure? Esteemed cultivator, ser, that's..."

Looking at him, Mercury tilted his head, and just waited. For a few more seconds, Lucky sputtered, then all the air left his body and his arms hung limply. There was a war raging in him, but Brock simply clapped him on the back loud enough to make the scrawnier man groan. "Ah! What was that for?!" Lucky complained.

"Courage," Brock nodded, as if it was the simplest thing in the world.

Lucky bit his lip, then nodded. "Yes, fine. The truth is... I'm the young master of the Yung clan. I staged the poisoning of the Joo's young mistress so that she could run from home, and was exiled for it."

"Oh," Mercury said slowly. "Well, shit."