

Chapter 300: Between Kindness and Cruelty

Blood-curses, Mercury found, were disgusting business. The way they rotted people from the inside out, and the way they clung to any living tissues they could find made it very understandable why most cultivators frowned on them. The righteous sects would, of course, classify these sorts of techniques as unorthodox and hunt their users down.

Which, after seeing the devastation a single application had caused, Mercury was a little tempted to do, too. But Keiko placed a hand on his shoulder and shook her head. “We’re healers,” she said. “We don’t hunt people down.”

That was a fair point. Still, looking at the slowly recovering patients, and the small pile of ash from all the bits of corrupted biology they’d had to burn... it was far from easy to just shrug and divorce himself from the urge to have it never happen again. But then, people killed for far less.

Would he hunt down the murderer of every story he heard? Chase after every ghost in the world? Well, he couldn’t exactly say that he *wouldn’t* - there was a decent chance it’d happen at least sometimes. But for now, he decided to let sleeping dogs lie.

Half the village thanked them profusely, with the other half barely wanting to see them after having heard the screams and groans from their medical tent. There was certainly some amount of horror involved in doing surgery without painkillers. Could Mercury disable someone’s sense of pain? Something to consider.

In the end, they only stayed for a simple meal, and to give instructions on how to care for the patients until they woke up. Then, Keiko told Mercury to shoulder the horribly heavy medical backpack of everything and they walked off.

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So the days passed. Hike after hike, village after village. Often, Zyl would fly ahead, being sent out by Keiko to look for specific flowers. In the evenings, the old woman would brew more elixirs, showing Mercury how to extract use from many plants by chopping, boiling, stirring and combining them.

“I’m no alchemist,” she said more often than once, “but I know how to make medicines. You have to use everything you can find if you want to be a healer.”

She lived by that motto, Mercury found. Keiko would scrounge up healing plants from beneath rocks, from landscapes so barren he was surprised to find anything growing there. She'd somehow sniff out a spiritual spring half a day's walk away, then gather its waters just to make more elixirs.

Unfailingly, the woman continued on. She treated everything they encounter with the same stoic distance. Every plant, every wound, every wonder and every dead body. They spotted mystical animals in the deep reaches of the uninhabited mountains, and Keiko would simply nod and walk forward as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

Often, Zyl would stop and sketch, keeping something of a travel journal. Mercury's documentation was a little more practical, but he did also decide to start noting down plants and other magical ingredients that the old woman used so consistently. It was his own little alchemy journal, kind of.

A proper alchemist would have known how to make a lot more things. Medicines, of course, but also poisons, strengthening pills, ones to gather more qi and assist in cultivation. Mercury was far from an alchemist, but at least, he'd learnt how to make minor healing elixirs with crappy supplies.

Not the sort that Keiko would ever let him use on a patient, of course, but practice was practice. He was fine taking some time to get good at a craft. Nothing came instantly, after all, and there was no harm in being bad at things before getting good.

And so, onwards they travelled.

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After another page and a half, they walked into yet another village. There'd been one every few days, so this wasn't exactly a particularly special sight. Except, of course, that this one seemed a lot more lively.

There was a bonfire burning in the square, with tables decked around it. Smoke plumed up into the sky, muddling the air faintly as it faded away. People sang, too, dancing around the fire.

Mercury tilted his head, though. It felt a little off. The smiles were a little too fragile, the glances a little too wary. They'd been let through the gates only after a smidge of prodding, despite these sorts of festivities usually being for anyone, even travellers. Maybe it was because they smelled of death?

It was the sort of clinical, herbal smell that clung to hands that made healing pills, hands that tended to bleeding wounds. A faint mix of metal and moss. But Mercury decided to just shrug it off.

Until, of course, he saw a woman in the festivities.

She'd taken the largest seat, at the head of the table, but he could see that she didn't belong from how people looked at her. Children pointed at her, only to be quickly ushered away by their parents. Her platinum hair fell like a waterfall, sparkling in the firelight, and the eyepatch covering one of her eyes was decorated with stitchings of a crimson rose.

The woman was laughing loudly, wolfing down bits of food, clapping at the music and dance, and generally seeming in high spirits. But her smile never reached her eyes. Mercury looked at her, and for a moment, the world seemed to freeze.

With a very slow, almost predatory motion, the woman turned, then grinned at him. "Oh, fellow travellers! Come up, join the festivities, please!" she called, her voice eerily calm.

Mercury tilted his head faintly, looking at Keiko for guidance. She was meant to teach him, after all. But the old woman just shrugged, and walked off into the crowd, joining a somewhat less populated corner. Which left just Mercury and Zyl.

Sighing softly, the mopaaw decided to steel himself. With a quick motion, he shrugged off the pack he usually carried, letting it rest on the soft sands strewn around the square. Wearing something of a customer service smile, he walked forwards, heading for the table the woman sat at and so lavishly enjoyed herself.

He took a seat on an offered chair, brought by a local woman. Politely, he cupped his hand and inclined his head. Zyl did the same. It made the blondie with the eyepatch laugh.

"How unfailingly polite! What, you from the righteous sects or something?" she asked, grinning brightly, roguish charm spilling off her. It was the same kind of charm that a snake might have before it bit.

Mercury, of course, decided to stick his hand right into the bear's maw. He smiled, wide as can be, then replied. "Well, you could call me a rogue cultivator. I've lived with some of the righteous clans, though. Why, would you like me to introduce you?" he asked.

At that, her grin turned downright feral. It was in the way that coldness crept into her eye, the way that killing intent slowly bled off her, the way her plate vibrated faintly. "Oh, so you are. Righteous bastard. Come here to collect my bounty, have you?"

"Ma'am," Mercury said, purposely using a term that might not be common in these lands, "I have no idea who you even are."

At that, some of the locals flinched. The woman glared at him with her one eye. "Oh? You don't know who I am?"

"Not the faintest idea," Mercury nodded politely, putting some grilled vegetables on his plate. He saw Zyl beginning to snicker from the corner of his eye.

The woman quickly rose to her feet, her chair falling to the side. "Well then, why don't I show you just who I am, huh? The Crimson Rose of the mountains, Bloodfiend MeiZi is my name. Here, let me brand it into your veins-"

She reached out in a quick motion, like a viper's bite, pressing her hand against Mercury's face. Except, of course, she didn't touch his skin. Instead, she touched a plate of cool, perfectly smooth metal behind his veil.

While her face was still wrapped in confusion, Mercury sighed. Very gently, a circlet wove around his head, silver strands of veins nestling between his hair. MeiZi tried to withdraw her hand, but remained stuck. The world itself seemed to freeze, holding her in place.

Very gently, Mercury reached out. He grabbed her by the wrist, then placed her arm by her side again, to the horror of the nearby villagers. But MeiZi didn't move to resist. Her teeth grit against each other, but all she could do was glare hatefully.

"What did you think that would achieve?" Mercury asked softly. "Were you hoping to make an example of me? To see a little bit of carnage."

"Fuck yo-"

"<Answer>," Mercury ordered.

MeiZi's face distorted for a moment. Then her lips parted, and she spoke. "I wanted to spill your blood to solidify my reputation. To make the village cooperate properly. To spread the word of my name." Even as the words left her mouth, she seemed almost surprised at it.

Nodding gently, Mercury scratched his beard. "I think you're a bit cruel, you know? A blood-curse. For what?"

"For being a dirtbag righteous bastard," she spat. "Sitting on your high horse and looking down on us."

"I'm learning from the Cult of Infernal Flames right now," Mercury said. "If you were perceptive, you'd have noticed who accompanied me. But that's okay. I forgive you for trying to kill me," Mercury said.

At that, MeiZi's face went redder with rage. "I don't need your damn forgiveness, miserable cur!"

Mercury reached out. In his hand, the stygian metal of the Dram of Starvation appeared. It shaped itself into a long needle. Nodding along with her outburst, Mercury replied clinically. "You do need it," he said. "Because I could kill you, right now."

The woman raged, straining against the invisible bonds that tied her, but the world itself laid still. It was as if time was frozen. Her mouth could move, her eyes, but nothing else. Mercury pushed the needle he had made from his nightmare-inducing weapon through the woman's palm, further up her arm.

And he tried to take her pain away, too. It was a clumsy first attempt, since he had never tried it before, but with a small twist and combination of <Babbling Brook> and <Unravel>, he was able to temporarily numb her.

It didn't calm her down though. "What are you doing?!" the woman demanded, voice shrill. "I can't feel my arm!"

Ah, he'd taken too much sensation. Whoops. Something to practice for next time. Shrugging, Mercury just focused on his work. Her blood pumped through her veins, touching on the needle.

And the Dream of Starvation drank deep.

It was always a weapon meant to grow from inflicting suffering, from drinking blood. And this woman had plenty of blood. He'd noticed it before, when he listened closely. The anomaly of her heartbeat. She was a blood-element cultivator, after all.

But not a drop ever left the wound. Torrents of crimson liquid, poisonous and cursed thrummed through her veins, seemingly neverending. The Dream of Starvation drank and drank and drank. As if it had spent all its life in a desert, it drank every bit of liquid it could.

The weapon didn't care whether the blood was corrosive, acidic, poisonous, cursed with viruses, or full of tiny parasites. The woman had dozens of weapons infused in her body, but the stygian steel simply kept drinking. Unbothered.

Mercury watched as the redness of anger disappeared from her face. She turned scared for a moment, then pale as she grew colder. Blood loss was a miserable thing to suffer, after all. And being stripped of one's weapons certainly must have scared a cultivator like her.

So, when he felt that most of her cruellest creations were drunk, he withdrew the weapon. She still had plenty of blood to fight, and he imagined she could wipe out most Reforging-Realm cultivators, though she might not do well in a fight against someone sharing her Gilded-Realm.

The needle vibrated with power, and Mercury quickly checked the Dream of Starvation.

[<Dream of Starvation>:

Grade: Bound B - Proficiency (1000/1000) (evolving)

Rank: 3 - Growth (1000/1000) (evolving)

Attributes: <Malleable>, <Iron Shell>, <Irreality>, <Warping Fury>]

Yep, there it was. A nicely fed little weapon. He smiled slightly, then nodded, and dismissed the Stifled Silence around his head.

MeiZi fell into her chair like a puppet with her strings cut. "What did you do to me?" she demanded, but her voice was breathless and frail.

Mercury sat back down gracefully. "I took away your nukes," he said simply. "No more bioweapons for you. Clearly, you'd use them for petty reasons. I wasn't going to chase after you, but you did try to kill me."

The woman gritted her teeth. For a moment, her hand flicked to her eyepatch, fingers wrapping around the fabric. Zyl shook his head slowly. "Please don't," the dragon said. "If you cause more trouble, I'll probably kill you."

She blinked her single eye at the mundanity of the words. The dragon had said them so casually, without so much as a single beat of hesitation. It was with perfect confidence, so solid that she very slowly dropped her hand to her side.

There was a mix of frustration and fear on her face. The kind that only a cornered animal could display. But neither Mercury nor Zyl did anything else. Instead, they just ate.

MeiZi, who had always been a wolf among sheep, experienced fear for the first time in a long time. And she didn't like it at all.

Despite that, she still ate, sharing a table with people who could kill her over even a simple mistake. And despite that, she still glared. Even now, she was exercising what minute power she had, stealing cuts of meat from other plates, grabbing for anything and everything she could scrounge up.

Was she starving, Mercury wondered? He knew she had eaten in that other village before this, but she seemed very hungry. Did the blood-stuff make her consume more calories? Did she not eat on the road?

Noticing his stare, MeiZi gave him a defiant glare. "What? Why are you looking at me like that?" she asked, pulling her robes tighter.

Instantly, Mercury flinched. "I'm sorry, no, I'm not looking at you that way. I'm gay. Zyl here," he patted the dragon on the shoulder, "is my boyfriend."

Her shoulders slumped. "Ah, that's good." She looked aside, seemingly a bit guilty, but then simply dug into the food again. The rest of the evening went rather quietly.

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When Mercury, Zyl and Keiko left the village, MeiZi stayed another day. Mercury hadn't spoken to her again - there hadn't been any need to. She was weaker, now. Strong enough to hurt people. Not strong enough to cause the same torture she had before. Also, she was experiencing weakness. Surely that would change her perspective a little.

Before leaving, Keiko made sure to reach into her pack and pay the villagers for their hospitality. She gave them a few bottles of fasting pills to replace the food in case of harsh winter, and then a handful of healing elixirs too. Strong enough ones to set broken bones in a mortal, but nothing more.

It was still enough to make the villagers kneel in thanks, but the old woman grimaced at that and waved them off. Then, they walked again. Mercury was supposed to spend a page with each leader of a peak, but Keiko waved off those worries. She was teaching him, or so she said, and that would take time. So they just walked.

And they walked, and walked, and walked.

Up one mountain, down another. Up another mountain. They stopped in villages. They gathered plants. Mercury learnt. His <Medicine> Skill was intrinsically fused into <Grain of Infinity>, so he let that knowledge feed the white hole that sat at his core.

The sun ate at him as he walked, but it hurt less these days. Mercury felt denser, brighter. Reality drifted him by. The weave brushed his fingers, and he found that he could touch it if he wanted.

There was something incredibly grounding about it, too. The pack grew easier to carry as the days went on. Mercury grew stronger, and he felt something within him solidify. It was a sort of... connection to the world, and the people around him.

He ate with Zyl and Keiko every night. He slept underneath the stars, underneath the midday sun. He felt the earth underneath his feet, dragged his fingers across rocks, used them to pluck hardy roots from the ground. He was real. So was the world around him, the air he breathed, the people he surrounded himself with.

After his time at the cult, dealing with these sorts of... comparatively normal things was good. It felt healthy to return to his inner personhood. There was no constant betrayal, no violence, no breaking and being broken.

Of course, they ran into fights. Skirmishing parties sent out by the clans. Shepherds bringing their goats to graze, who were a little too willing to smack their heads. Mercury was almost proud to admit that two wooden sticks had shattered against his cranium. Which did get funny looks.

Maybe he didn't need to fully feel ordinary. But he enjoyed it when there was a little less violence in his life.

All throughout it, the Dream of Starvation writhed and slowly grew, ever approaching its evolution. It was an almost living thing. Juno seemed intrigued by the weapon, and spent much of her time watching it, and the rest of her time walking alongside the rest of them.

Keiko quite enjoyed the company of the quiet wolf. Sometimes, Juno would even let the old woman ride on her back, since the wolf had grown quite tall now. She'd begun cultivating, too, which Mercury found fun.

Compared to the two of them, Zyl seemed to focus on the grounding the most. He had been, after all, struggling with it for a lot of his life. Even when he lived with humans, he was treated as noble and almost worshipped. He had few friends who properly treated him like people.

Which Mercury thought was a shame, because he was such a lovely person. The two of them spent hours just talking, chatting, leaning against each other. Mercury would manipulate his mana, turning more of the material solid, spinning it, practicing his control, and Zyl would paint.

He would grab sticks, incinerate them instantly, leaving only carbon behind, then use that charcoal to sketch in journals. Sometimes, he'd simply scratch murals into the rocks of the mountains. And sometimes, when things were particularly nice, Mercury would wake to the faint burning of his skin and see Zyl sketching the sunrise.

Faint lines of rose and gold caught in the dragon's crimson hair, playing across his shoulders and muscles, a canvas in front of him, and brushes laid out. His eyes would be so focused, and a faint smile playing on his lips, and Mercury fell in love with him all over again.

It was a time of ups and downs. Peace stress. Mercury saw so many people nearly die, and brought them back from the brink of death. He saw people celebrate their arrival, and others celebrate their departure. He saw the death and destruction cultivators could wreak, and he destroyed a man's cultivation in the ashes of a house that man had burnt.

Keiko slightly frowned at that last one. "Why do you act so much?" she asked him one evening, a few days past that.

"Hm?" Mercury tilted his head, confused. "What do you mean?"

"You intervene," the old woman said, poking their meagre campfire with a stick. The flicker flames reflected in her eyes, aged knuckles curling over wood. "You hurt. People die all the time. People kill all the time. You try to stop them by hurting them, by making them weak. Why? Are you not afraid they'll die? Is it good to cause pain?"

Her voice was raspy and dry. The kind of voice that was defeated. Mercury smiled faintly at her. "I think, arrogantly, that I can make the world a better place," he said.

Keiko shook her head. "But you intervene. You act as judge, jury, and executioner."

"I do," Mercury agreed. "And it is arrogant. Sometimes, I worry about that, about whether I overreach. But I don't think I do. I don't kill, for one, but I remove their ability to cause hurt. Not everyone should have the power to slaughter dozens. People are greedy. People are cruel. People are angry. And I can show them a bit of perspective."

"If you asked me if I regret it... maybe, at least a little. I don't enjoy hurting people, or making them afraid. Mostly, I'm not a perfect person, but I do my best to minimize harm. To have a positive impact. And sometimes, that means reducing the negative impact of someone else."

For a long moment, Keiko remained quiet. She stared at the fire, long-lost memories brushing across her skull. "I used to kill." The words came out so weak that the old woman looked in need of support. Juno silently rose from Mercury's shadow, traipsed over, and rested her head in the old healer's lap.

Mercury nodded. "I imagined so."

Keiko gave a rueful smile. "It's easy to see, isn't it? That I am a killer. The blood still clings to my hand. The screams still ring in my ears. Life is fleeting, and I snuffed it out so often..."

"I see no blood. But it's easy to see the regret in your eyes," Mercury said. His voice was calm, without judgment. Keiko looked at him when he spoke, and a small smile cracked on her lips.

"You see regret?" she asked. When he just nodded, she shook her head. "You're too kind to me, Mercury. I can never forgive myself for the violence I caused."

At that, he almost laughed. But he held back. Instead, his answer was simple. "I can," he said. "I can forgive you, because I don't know you as violent. The people you hurt have a right to safety, so don't hurt them again. Stay distant if you must. But right now, you are making the world better. You heal. Right now, you are kind. And to deprive the world of kindness, well, it would just be another murder for you to commit."

The old woman didn't reply to that. She just turned back to the fire. Poked it. Threw in another block of wood, and stirred it with her stick. But she held the wood tight, her knuckles turning white.

Keiko was a true healer. She had promised the world to no longer be violent. Not to snuff out life unless it was absolutely needed. She was no longer a butcher.

Maybe she deserved that same grace herself.