

Chapter 298: Fleeting Treachery

Zyl stood in front of what could - if one was a loose, generous kind of person - be called an army of children.

They were the disciples of Honesty Treachery. A whole armada of half-starved orphans and adults, each wielding knives and with the cold calculation of betrayal in their heart. They had the sort of paranoid look around them that only thieves and assassins had. Each and every single one of them was a traitor, to some degree.

And the dragon in front of them found that rather sad. So, he decided to give them a very simple reason to not betray each other.

Overwhelming force.

He walked forward, and a hundred traps snapped shut. Youths looked at him from behind rocks. Old women watched as he was covered in nets and blankets. Wooden spears shot from the floor, knives flew through the air.

A hundred traps shattered against his scales.

Zyl was strong. Compared to these disciples, deacons, even elders... he was more than just strong. He was unbeatable. Landmines exploded, but the fire failed to even touch his suit. Every molecule of heat was ruthlessly dragged under his control and discarded like a blanket of ash.

Stepping out of it, the second wave of traps washed over him. But he was a walking disaster, a calamity to have come over these poor fools. He moved his hand, and entirely through his brute strength, caused ripping winds so violent that they threw all the attacks off course. They were united against him, and yet, they were failing.

But at the same time, he couldn't help but smile. Because despite everything, none of the disciples were backstabbing each other. It was an odd sight - he'd seen so much blood spilled on this mountain, and yet, now that he was the one walking forward, not a drop of it touched the ground.

He'd worked hard for this. To lure them all out of their hidey holes, to force them to ally against him, to create a sense of camaraderie in the youths. Some of them had fought

harder, some still stood off to the side, and some waited to ambush him once everyone was dead, but they weren't cruel to each other. They hadn't been, for a few days.

So, he did his due diligence. He grabbed an invisible girl from the air and threw her at the rest of the kids - and they *caught* her. She didn't slam into the ground. Instead, a half dozen young bodies tumbled over, getting nothing more than a few scrapes and bruises for his effort.

He snatched a thrown knife from the air, sliced through a sword with his claws, and lifted another kid up when the boy had been about to be impaled by sudden bamboo spikes. Quickly, he tossed the boy aside, dealing with the elemental bombardment.

A dozen qi-based attacks washed over him. The deacons and elders used their qi-techniques to blast him with fire and water, with shadow and light, with earth and wind. Of course, Zyl just shrugged them off. It was little more than a chip on his shoulder.

Except, that would be a poor show. Instead of that, he faked a stagger. A small misstep, putting him off-balance.

Instantly, the trained assassins pounced. Illusions clouded his sight. Steel rained in on him, thin wires ready to slice him to ribbons. Zyl quickly swapped out his expensive suit for a cheaper one that he could damage without being upset about it.

The fabric was partially shredded by the assault. Explosions rang in his ears, barely scratching his skin, but he let them cut bloody gashes. He'd heal again anyway.

He got hurt. But it wasn't too bad. Despite everything, he smiled.

Of course, he made sure it was an ugly, ferocious smile. He charged faster and faster as his skin flayed. For a brief moment, he was locked in a fistfight with a bulky girl. She knocked one of his teeth out - her fist should have broken on his bones, but he let it happen. Then he tossed her aside with a handful of bruises.

He bit a sword in half. Crushed a fireball in his palm. Released his aura in a roar, using an intimidation-Skill to drive a dozen disciples to the ground. Elders came at him from all angles, cratering the rocks as they moved.

Zyl danced around their attacks carefully, ensuring they never hurt each other. He was immobilized and bruised and battered. But despite that, he couldn't stop smiling. He got hurt, sure, but it was such an inconsequential pain for him.

Wings sprouted from his back, and he flapped once, dragging two hapless kids who held onto him into the sky. And the others? They saved them. Elders flew in to pull them off, and bring them safely to the ground.

Every single disciple was staring into the sky, where the peak elders surrounded Zyl. Grey hair fluttered in the evening sunlight, robes concealing bodies that bore decades of strife. Muscles that rippled, scars stretching over wrinkled skin. They clashed.

The sky came alight with techniques and brutal exchanges. Bits of blood and bone rained down, and the disciples stared up. Not a single one hit each other, they just watched, enthralled.

Zyl was beaten up and battered, but he gave out as well. He left thin gashes on skin, impacts against the elders that hurt them without killing them. He was rougher on the adults than he was on the kids, because they could take it. They were also all seasoned murderers, so he really didn't feel too bad about roughing them up a little.

Another ten or so minutes of theatrics later, Zyl was bruised and battered, but feeling happy. The stone floor beneath him was covered in a good bit of blood. A few elders were getting first aid down below. He was panting heavily and bleeding from a dozen deep wounds.

In front of him was one more elder. The two of them locked eyes. Zyl smiled happily, while the old woman's eyes turned ice-cold. They moved, their figures blurring.

For a moment Zyl stood in the air. Then, a dozen slashes carved him apart, and all that fell to the ground was a splash of blood and a single disconnected arm. The rest was eviscerated without remains.

The disciples cheered, clapping each other on the shoulder, celebrating.

Zyl, of course, had simply flown away with insane speed, burrowing into the ground, and regenerating in a small pool of magma. It would take him only a few hours to regrow the lost arm. But, with a little luck, the camaraderie that had been built would help to change the peak for the next few years.

Mercury laughed. It wasn't the sane, polite laugh that he usually had. It was the laughter of a lunatic, unhinged and shrill. He was denser now. Remade and rewoven proper. He felt the exact same, and yet so different. When he felt the light of the sun on his skin, it still burnt him, but far less so. He was so much *more* now.

It had gone from turning his bones to ash to leaving strong burns on his skin. It still hurt, it was still abominable, but he could withstand it. He healed faster than he burnt again. Mercury breathed in, then out.

Gently, he reached out with a hand. Then he closed his fist, grabbing onto the world.

His fingers touched upon the threads of reality, the <Dreamweave>, and seized it. He could pull them physically now, not just with his mind. Brush them aside, tear them apart, steal them for himself - but he did none of that.

Gently, Mercury put the threads back in place, and brushed them over. Reality was a little like a loose cloth. He could fit his fingers between the gaps, mess with the threads, then smooth it all over again. No harm done. Still, he laughed again.

Then he got up, brushed the dust from his feet, and looked at the world. At himself. He saw a faint amount of that radioactivity that the godvein had. For a moment, Mercury creased his forehead. His reality was leaking out, poisoning and reinforcing the world around him.

Already a faint pool of liquid rainbow was generating underneath his feet. His ascension was definitely a rather peculiar one.

He breathed. In, then out. Closed his eyes for a moment.

In a single second, he dragged all the leaking reality back inwards.

His skin turned into a perfect barrier. Instead of spilling outwards, it turned into a self-reinforcing ecosystem. Just by virtue of his density, he created more "reality", then contained that within himself, turning even denser. In a way, he was passively cultivating.

Was this a strange synergy with his <Resolution>, he wondered? Maybe a byproduct of thinking himself into existence by the simple fact that he knew he existed? It was an odd thought, and one he didn't pay much mind to.

The problem was already solved. And he had learnt from Kang. The man had taught him much about the world and its interactions. Mercury really was surprised that he had simply

never flown high enough to see the heavens. It was only now that he realized they barred his way to the moon.

And that was unacceptable to him. Any proper cat would absolutely want to stand on the surface of the moon!

He laughed for a moment. Then, Zyl came home, with a stump of an arm, and he stopped caring about anything else in the world.

“What happened to you?” Mercury breathed, concern evident in his voice.

Zyl blinked, looking at Mercury. “What happened to *you*?” the dragon countered instantly, eyeing his boyfriend up and down.

“Huh? Do I look weird?”

The dragon tilted his head. For a moment he brought his stump up to his chin as if to scratch it, then dropped it again, and instead ran his healthy hand through his hair. “I... don’t quite know how to describe it. You seem... denser.”

Acting bashful, Mercury gasped and crossed his arms over his chest. “Are you calling me fat?!”

For a moment, the two just stared at each other, then both burst out laughing. Mercury quickly pulled the dragon into a hug, then wrapped a hand around the stump of his arm. The <Grain of Infinity> thumped in tune with his heartbeat, and Mercury started to pull at Zyl’s threads.

He tilted his head to the side, then let his own reality spill outwards a little. Then he imagined every detail of the missing arm, <Unravelling> the stump, filled with energy from his <Grain of Infinity>, and then reconstructed it from entirely nothing using <Resolution>.

Was that Skill meant to be used on others? Maybe not, Mercury didn’t know, but he had more than enough self-buffing infrastructure in place to bend the rules a little. Zyl just watched as strange strings of silver gathered, then turned into white bone and red muscles, before finally creating a layer of scales on top. Those scales then quickly shifted into skin.

Zyl blinked. Then, he clenched his fist. Felt his nails digging into his palm faintly. He blinked one more time, then looked at Mercury, who shrugged helpfully. Zyl laughed, then squeezed the big idiot he was dating. For a long moment, they held each other.

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The next morning, Kang Tae-Yoon politely knocked on the door of their safehouse. Mercury opened it, and the peak master gave a polite, somber smile, and a single wave to follow.

Yawning gently, Mercury stepped outside. The moment his toes crossed the line to the outside world, Kang Tae-Yoon's grin turned demonic. He pulled a knife from within his robe, and stabbed it at Mercury with murderous intent, right at the cat's eye.

Mercury didn't even blink. Steel impacted his cornea. Qi raged against qi.

The knife broke.

With another yawn, Mercury blearily rubbed his eye. "Mmmh, that was uncomfortable. I felt it squish a bit, y'know? Rude."

Kang Tae-Yoon smiled, then bowed, deeply, at the waist, cupping his hands. "Please," he said, "cut my head off."

"The hell? No, I won't," Mercury said.

"You must," the peak master begged. "I want to know what it feels like. You could survive it, right? You could put me back together, I want you to put me back together, I-"

"I'm not decapitating you, weirdo," Mercury said, shaking his head.

Kang remained still for a long moment, then slowly rose with a faint frown. "Fine," he said, sounding entirely displeased. "But your stay here is done. I've learnt a lot from you, and you've learnt a lot from me, too. Go. Next time I see you, I'll kill you."

Mercury smiled, then reached forward and ruffled the younger man's hair. "You won't," he said calmly. "But you'll try! And we'll have fun. Good luck out there, Kang."

"Call me Tae-Yoon."

"Sure," Mercury nodded. "Good luck, Tae-Yoon. Be a little nicer, when you can."

The brown haired, handsome young man smiled. It was a gentle, calm smile. The kind that would usually have gone for a mask on his face. The kind he'd have worn before shoving a knife into someone's eye. But this time, he didn't. "Alright," he said, shaking his head, hiding his face behind his hand. "I'll do my best. Now scurry off."

And Mercury did, no more words needed. It was an honest goodbye, and it didn't even have any treachery in it. Kang Tae-Yoon, for the first time in his life, just let something go.

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Walking across the peak was a surreal experience. The tunnels were quiet - they always were. But today, it was a different kind of quiet, one without tension. Mercury drew the Storm's Raiment around him and Zyl, enhancing the density of his veil, smothering the light that tried to burn his skin.

Faint calls of celebration, maybe even camaraderie, reached the two of them. Mercury, of course, ignored them, pulling Zyl along. There was a thin smile on the dragon's handsome face, and Mercury stole a swift kiss as they walked through the dreary tunnels.

It was a little awkward, but he enjoyed the walk. They emerged on the mountain, at some point, and descended down it. A dense fog shrouded much of it - something Mercury thought was probably the result of an obscuring formation. It would be easy to get lost wandering in the fog forever if one weren't keyed into it.

Mercury was not, in fact, keyed into it. One last trick of Tae-Yoon's, he imagined. Not that he minded. <Itinerant> made short work of the formation, with him and Zyl soon reaching the foot of the mountain.

The two of them exited the fog to a grassy plain, very different from the cold rocks that had marked their surroundings for the past page. There was a cool wind in the air, and Mercury saw his breath faintly mist up.

In front of him, there was a picnic blanket laid out. It was really a nice blanket, fabric interlaced, forming a pattern of loops and whirls in greys and blacks. On it, there sat an old woman. She wore a straw hat, and a long robe. She even had a cape, with a simple inscription. Two signs, peak master.

Yoshida Keiko, peak master of Fleeting Life sat, placing jam on bread, and cracked open a single eye to greet Mercury. "You're finally done," she said, then nodded. Slowly, she brought the bread to her mouth and took a bite.

Mercury stood, giving an awkward, crooked smile, hidden by his veil. "I think I'm on time," he said.

"So you are," Keiko shrugged. "I was in no hurry."

He snickered, then nodded and cupped his hands, giving a short bow.

Zyl eyed the blanket, and nodded at it. "May we take a seat?" he asked.

Keiko tilted her head, dragging her hat low. "Sure, sit," she said, gesturing at it.

Gently, Zyl lowered himself to the grass, until his knees touched the blanket, his shoes remaining off it to avoid dirtying the fabric. The old woman nodded in appreciation. Mercury hesitated for a moment longer, looking forward. "What's that?" he asked.

His eyes were fixated on a massive piece of wood, leaning against the woman's shoulder. At its top, there was an axe and a brutal hook. It was a massive halberd, taller than even Mercury himself, and yet, he had barely noticed it on the woman.

She tilted her head, then looked at the weapon as if she'd forgotten it was there. "Oh," she said, smiling fondly. "That's insurance. Don't worry about it, dearie. Best case, I won't ever need it."

With another quick bite, she finished up her bread, then nodded at a large backpack slash basket behind her. "Now go on. Carry that for me, will you?"

Mercury tilted his head. "Carry it for you?" he asked.

The old woman got up from the blanket, dusting off her robes, then crossed her hands behind her back. She looked at Mercury, then nodded. "That's what I said, isn't it?"

"It is," he confirmed.

"So," she gestured at the box. "Pick it up. We're going travelling."

Those words lit a small glint in Mercury's eyes. "Travelling?" he asked. "Not to the peak of Fleeting Life?"

Keiko waved him off. "No, no, you must have enough of stuffy mountains for a lifetime. We'll travel. Otherwise..." she turned to him, her eyes dark, and bereft of all the mirth they'd held on their first meeting. "Otherwise, our dear cult leader might come and kill you."

Mercury nodded. He'd been having that feeling. "So, you'll take me to the Skyflame Monks?"

With a short nod, the healer gestured at the backpack again. "Yes," she said, "as long as you pick up the basket."

Rolling his eyes gently, Mercury walked over, then tried to store the basket in his inventory.

And promptly failed.

He tilted his head, then sighed, shrugged and put his arms through the straps, lifting it off the ground. The basket weighed about as much as a mountain, and Mercury wasn't exactly physically the strongest, so he grunted and strained, trying to lift it.

Zyl blinked, then walked over and easily lifted it with a single hand. "Huh," he said, nodding appreciatively. "Nice weight to it. Can I carry it?"

Keiko laughed, then shook her head. "No," she said. "You'd ruin the medicines inside. It needs to be your boyfriend, boy."

At that, the dragon gave Mercury a helpless smile and a shrug. Keiko set about gently folding and packing up the blanket and her picnic equipment, then strapped the halberd to her back. Even there, it still seemed to almost vanish, cloaked by the woman's harmless aura.

Mercury, for his part, was still struggling with the stupid backpack, but with all his strength, gritting his teeth, and reinforcing his body with all the qi he could muster, he managed to lift it, and take a first step.

<Itinerant> made that one carry him a dozen paces forward, but the basket almost instantly crushed him. Keiko snickered at his misfortune, then took out a walking cane, and set off across the fields. "Come now, Mercury. The nearest road is only a few miles out. We'll need to hurry."

The joy in his eyes had died. Mercury grunted at the load he was carrying, straining with all his might against... a stupid fucking backpack of all things. That was his hardest trial yet, in the world of cultivation? A backpack?

He grunted, readjusting the weight on his shoulders, dislocating a bone, and quickly putting it back into place. Then he trudged on forward, by the old healer's side.

Keiko, unlike the other peak masters, didn't smell of blood. So he was curious to learn from her the most. Hopefully, she'd teach him to be a better doctor.

The sun rose, and Mercury felt his skin start to burn. He did his best to stoke his excitement, even when the training looked to be gruelling.

