

## Chapter 301: Unreasonable Idiot

Mercury had known, for a long while, that he liked making the world a bit of a better place. He'd done it a lot of ways. From monster hunting, exploring and closing tears, healing the fabric of the world, helping people regain their memories or conquer past demons or even just building houses and fixing cookware, there were lots of ways he'd done good.

Then and there, he thought about it a little differently. He put a man's guts back in his stomach, then used the <Thread> aspect of <Carve> to sew it closed. Strings of mana coalesced, shot forward, and pulled things that needed to be close together. With his new ability to manipulate solid mana, Mercury noticed a few more details about the threads he'd never noticed before, but he placed those discoveries aside.

Instead, he used his increased control to shift their effect - from making it harder to think to a much more specific reaction: reducing the pain someone felt. The man on the ground went from groaning and bleeding out after having his belly slit by a sword to simply gasping in pain.

Kneeling on a battlefield was a somber affair, Mercury found. For bigger ones, clans or sects might gather their dead and hold funerary rites. This was not one of those cases. It had been a simple, small skirmish. Fifty people, maybe. Twenty bodies. All looted, stripped. Trails of blood leading away, as those who could still walk retreated.

The man on the ground could not have walked. He'd been unconscious by the time Mercury found him, and only a healing elixir brought him back from the brink of death. But elixirs only did so much, and setting them up to heal was a good part of the process.

So, Mercury stitched. "Draw them a little tighter, the connections are too loose," Keiko advised him. "And make the threads more even. They've got edges and are irritating the skin more than they need to."

Indeed, she was right. On a microscopic level his threads were broad and thin. Almost like a blade. It was, he imagined, a passive influence given that they were born from <Carve>, but he quickly got a grasp on it and shaped them better.

Healing was a chore. It wasn't a clean or nice job. He couldn't just cast a few spells and be done with it - though those spells existed. Occasionally, Keiko did also use healing techniques, and Mercury was learning those, too. But they weren't a cure-all.

People's bodies, it turned out, were very complex, and finding solutions to universally apply was difficult. Especially when dealing with supernatural bodies. Because on one hand, those often could take a lot more energy than a mortal could. A top grade healing elixir might simply give a mortal a heart attack.

But for truly powerful cultivators? It might regrow a patch of skin at best. Not to mention any lost muscle-mass, or similar metabolic consequences.

"You're getting distracted. Focus," Keiko chided him, and Mercury heeded the advice. He was, after all, trying to save someone's life. That deserved at least a good bit of attention. His hands were guided by the remnants of <Medicine>, fused into <Grain of Infinity>, and he could tell that each motion of his left behind fewer injuries than there were before.

It was a long procedure, but in the end, they succeeded. A few hours had passed, but the man was stable, breathing, and they were even able to move him from the pool of his own blood and dirt onto a stretcher.

He'd fallen asleep, of course, so Mercury would have to carry him. Luckily, carrying a stretcher on his own would have been hard, so they tied it to Juno's back. He could have carried it with magic, but a Beastmaster was less suspicious than someone using telekinesis, or so Keiko said, and everyone was fine to go along with that.

And so they walked on, ever further east.

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After three days, and as many fasting pills, the man finally awoke. First, he panicked, screamed, scrambled, and fell. The impact with the ground knocked him out for a second. Then, Mercury picked him up, and apparently, that was enough to wake the guy again. While he was face to face with a giant wolf.

He screamed, then passed out again.

Mercury shook his head at the antics, and Zyl couldn't stop a snicker. When was the last time he'd felt afraid of a wolf? The dragon concluded that it must've been when he read about them in children's books, at best.

The human woke again that evening, this time laying by the side of a campfire. His eyes fell on Keiko first, who proved, apparently, more calming than Juno. The wolf was currently hiding in Mercury's shadow again, stating that it was almost more comfortable than the outside world.

"W-where am I? What happened?!" the panicked fighter asked.

Keiko glanced at him, then softly shook her head. "Easy there, boy." She called him a boy, but the man was most likely in his early thirties. "You got hurt, badly. Picked your bleeding body off the ground and stitched you back up is what we did. Twice."

When he rolled off the stretcher, a few wounds had torn open. Again. So, another bit of medical care followed. Mercury didn't particularly mind... but he also didn't particularly enjoy it. At least, this time, the man seemed to listen.

He reached for his stomach, his fingers soon finding the wound as his face contorted into a grimace. "Argh! It hurts! How... how am I alive?"

"My apprentice did well," Keiko said, not even bothering to look at him. "That's all there is to it."

"Apprentice...?" the man asked, still dazed, looking around. Soon, his eyes found Mercury, then Zyl, as well. He swallowed heavily for a moment, since Mercury, with his robes and veil looked rather creepy, while Zyl was handsome, but with the kind of strength that let him pop heads like watermelons.

"The creepy one," Keiko provided helpfully.

"Hey, what the heck?" Mercury asked. But he snickered at the comment, not really hurt. He raised a gloved hand to give the man a wave. The sun had taken to scorching his skin more badly again, so he was trying to remain covered, even when it was evening. "Yo. Don't move too much, alright?"

Blinking slowly, the man pinched his own cheek. Then, he let out a long breath of air, looking down at his own shaking hands. "This is real," he whispered.

Mercury tilted his head. Was he grateful or despairing at the fact that he was alive?

"So many died."

That was true, Mercury supposed. There were a lot of bodies. That was a sucky feeling.

He imagined the guy might be feeling like himself after the first Blood Eclipse. Losing so many of the people he cared about, those that anchored him. And leaving him with no real direction to speak of, either.

There was nothing quite like violence to foster a distaste for violence.

The man spent a long time like that, just looking at his hands. For a moment he looked up at Mercury, clenching his fingers into fists. He breathed a long, ragged breath, then let it go. There had been a question he'd not spoken. Why had he been saved? Why no one else?

He dropped it, because he knew there'd be no good answer. He'd been saved because life was precious, and because he got lucky. Maybe unlucky, depending on perspective. He was angry and frustrated, sad and guilty. But he was still breathing.

Mercury thought this might be one of those moments where survival in and of itself is victory. He sighed softly, then nodded. "Rest," he told the man. "Eat some food. Drink some water. And then go to sleep. We'll carry you along however long you need. And drop you off at a village, probably."

At that, the man slowly nodded. "Alright," he said slowly. "My name is Joran."

It was a simple sort of name, the kind that demanded no respect. A name for the road, that came with no attachments or burdens, and no expectations. They all replied in kind.

"Keiko."

"Mercury."

"Zyl."

Hearing the introductions, Joran nodded, then cupped his hands and gave them a short bow. "Thank you for saving me." His voice was a little shaky as he spoke. He didn't feel grateful, but he said it nonetheless.

With a shake of her head, Keiko handed him a bowl of stew. "Here, eat," she commanded. "You'll need it to get your strength back."

Joran ate, and no more words needed to be spoken that evening.

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The man slept for another few days as the group travelled on. Mercury had gotten better at foraging for plants, picking up a minor Skill related to it. <Herbalism>, it was called, and it helped him both with the finding, understanding, and usage of those herbs in alchemy. A wide but shallow skill that didn't offer any incredibly powerful boons. But he liked it.

Seeing those small Skills, like <Cooking> or even <Medicine> back when he'd gotten it, was a reward in and of itself. An acknowledgement of his efforts, even if he wasn't an expert in a topic. It was why Zyl cherished his art and gardening so much. They were new frontier, places to get gentle Skills rather than violent ones.

Once more, Mercury thought of it as a grounding exercise. Learning to not become arrogant, and to treat people with respect no matter how powerful he was. There was beauty in that, and it was perhaps the most important lesson that he was trying to take with himself from this recent journey.

Being a healer was, in a lot of ways, about being kind and patient. People would thrash, yell, groan, and complain, and you had to endure all of that. Lots of patients didn't like being cared for, didn't enjoy having their limits pointed out. And yet, it was part of the job.

So, Mercury cultivated his patience. Even for Joran, who at first was terrified of Juno when he woke again. This time, at least, he didn't throw himself off the stretcher, so Mercury had some time to explain before he came face-to-face with the wolf. Juno also helped by giving him a polite greeting.

Which helped Joran accept her as a beast familiar. Which, technically, she was, even though Mercury didn't really think of her that way. Juno was her own person, after all, and the familiar link really was just in place to show their friendship. In the same way that Ruvah had asked him to accept them as a familiar.

It took a few more days to reach the nearest village. By then, Joran had healed enough to stand and walk a little, but not enough to march alongside them. So, for the most part, he still laid on Juno's back, staring into the sunny sky.

Often, Mercury wondered what was going through the man's head. His face would distort, or suddenly grow serene. There were emotions he was clearly working through - wounds that would simply need time to heal, with no real way around that. Keiko, for her part, ignored that entirely, solely concerning herself with her job and the march.

When they did arrive at a village, the locals saw Joran and grimaced. At first, they did not want to take him in. But, at the end of the day, there were always kind people. An old man,

some kind of chronicler, Mercury imagined, scolded everyone for their cruelty with a ragged voice, then said he'd take Joran in himself.

As thanks, Keiko handed him a few alchemical pills. Mostly fasting ones, to ensure that the man could feed himself and Joran through a winter, if needed. With a handful more healing elixirs, the patient should be healed by then, and the chronicler would have an extra set of hands.

Maybe Joran would leave to head back to his original clan, but he said he didn't have many ties there. His friends had died on the battlefield with him, and he had no family to speak of. Dead parents, from sickness and age, and no spouse or kids. So, perhaps he'd settle here.

Mercury decided it wasn't his problem anymore, exactly. Keiko did the same. Once she had dropped their newest burden, she simply gave a curt nod, then walked out through the gates, deciding to never engage with it again. That was that, in her mind.

A clean break with a patient was the best, she told him. They might keel over dead anytime, after all. The best any healer can do is to set them up for recovery. People were terribly fragile. Joran might stumble, trip, reopen all his wounds, and bleed out on the floor, but they didn't have the time or resources to supervise him.

He was now responsible for his own future. If he wanted to squander his life again, Keiko wouldn't stop him from doing so.

But Mercury heard it in her voice. The fact that she sincerely wished for the man to not go to war again. To just become a farmer or something otherwise peaceful. Learn a trade and create something, rather than just perpetuating violence.

The martial world had enough killers in it.

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After another two pages of walking, the group did finally see their destination on the horizon. The winding mountain paths meant that progress had been slow, but at the same time, it certainly was a sight to see. To walk a spiraling road up a rocky cliffside, and to emerge around a bend, only to see the monastery in the distance.

The Skyflame Monks sure took their name seriously. Their monastery was made from solid bricks of grey stone, towering into the sky. It wrapped around the mountain and its lower

valley like a writhing snake built from bricks. Buildings clung to the sides of peaks, sprawled out in the valley below, and rose high into the sky.

The sun caught the metallic roofs at an angle, reflecting off of them, and casting scintillating colours onto the nearby ground. It was a beautiful sight, the kind that made Zyl instantly pull out his sketchbook.

Mercury just stared for a long while. Then he laughed. After all this time, it really was interesting to see the construction. He had expected something akin to humility from a faction that called themselves monks, but there was none of that. The monastery was gigantic.

An impressive feat of architecture, and a beautiful sight. It was also still another day's walk away, but that wasn't too much trouble. Mercury could have gotten there in a moment with <Itinerant>, if he wanted to, but that was not the point. There were still more herbs to gather. And they'd purposely walk slowly, so Zyl could easily catch up with just a bit of running or flying.

For his part, the dragon remained behind, sitting on a rocky outcropping, feet dangling over a cliff, and simply drew. The way his eyes crinkled when he focused was cute, Mercury thought. Then, he followed Keiko, who was already a few dozen steps ahead, paying the beauty no mind with her usual stoicism.

And they walked forward.

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It was afternoon the next day that they made it to the monastery proper. The feeling of standing in front of it was a little odd. There were towering walls to keep outsiders out, held by guards who wore nothing but pale robes. Beige or white with faint red-gold embroidery.

"Outsiders!" a woman called down from on high. "What do you want?"

For a moment, Mercury considered what to say. All the ways he could lie to get into there. Then, he decided that wasn't his style at all. He was blunt at the best of times. Of course, he could be diplomatic, but... well, these seemed like rather straight-laced folks from his first impression. So, blunt it was.

"I'm cursed to burn whenever the sun touches my skin and seek a remedy!" he called up to the woman.

That made her frown, something Mercury was only able to make out due to his supernatural eyesight. "A curse?" she asked. "Is it infectious?"

"Not in the slightest!"

It was clear that the woman didn't quite believe him. Then again, their monastery was the foremost expert on sun-related matters in the martial world. She sighed, then conferred with another guard, then sighed again. "Wait here," she said, "I'll fetch an elder."

So that's what they did. Just wait it out, watching the sun slowly trail across the sky. Occasionally, Mercury fanned himself a little with his hands, small plumes of smoke rising from his skin, with the smell of carbon.

After a few minutes, the woman returned with a much older woman, this one wearing fancier robes and a veil, too. It was a simpler, more translucent one than Mercury's, covering only her face, and being mostly see-through, but it did match his in colour. Which was nice.

The elder eyed him for precisely half a second. Her mouth twisted into a deep frown. "Open the gates," she directed with a quick wave of her hands. Instantly, the doors began to creak open, blocks of stone twisting along enormous hinges. "And ready a set of rooms for our new guests, too. I imagine they will be staying a while."

With a quick cupping of their hands, and a set of shallow bows, Mercury, Zyl, and Keiko headed into the monastery. The elder awaited them on the other side, her short white hair still maintaining hints of blonde. The tall woman cupped her hands, but did not even incline her head, standing perfectly straight.

"Greetings. I am elder Yue, pleased to make your acquaintance. For the foreseeable future, I will be your guide for your stay in the monastery." She paused, then glanced at Keiko, and the bag on Mercury's back. "It is rare we see healers who carry a curse themselves. But, I suppose," she lowered her voice the longer she spoke, "that it's not as unexpected when talking about the *demon doctor*."

Keiko smiled faintly. "Yes, yes, it's a pleasure seeing you again as well, Meimei." With shuffling steps, Keiko walked forward, striding around as if she owned the place. "Now, show me your infirmary! I know some of your idiot disciples probably burnt themselves practicing."

Elder Yue laughed at the nonchalance of the much smaller woman. "Right you are, they always do. Come on, then. Tell me a little of your journey while we walk. Or, perhaps, tell me a bit about your apprentice."



“Apprentice?” Keiko scoffed. “I’ve learnt as much from him as he has from me. Outrageous, I tell you. He’s a sorcerer from the west!”

“A sorcerer?” Yue Mei’s eyebrows raised beneath her veil, the old woman proving to be, perhaps, a bit of a gossip. “My, my. And you got yourself embroiled with that trouble? You know how sorcerers are seen in the martial world.”

Keiko sighed, lamenting her fate. “Indeed. And yet, the brat is a terrifying talented cultivator, too. Went from absolutely nothing to the Gilded-Realm in nothing but a few pages.”

At that, Yue Mei’s jaw dropped open. “*Pages?!*” she gasped, the surprise written right on her face. “How?! He’d face heavenly tribulation after a few dozen days of cultivating?”

“Sorcery,” Keiko provided with a shrug.

“Of course it is. It’s always that dang sorcery.” Yue frowned theatrically as she spoke. Then, after a moment of silence, both women started snickering at some shared, confusing joke. Mercury accepted his label with grace, choosing not to speak up as the two chattered over what must have been a long time of separation.

Eventually, though, he did ask. “Excuse me, elder Yue, how do you know Keiko?”

“Ohhh, you let the brat address you so casually?” Yue Mei teased her friend for a moment, but then turned back to Mercury. “KeiKei and me are war buddies, kiddo. We’ve butchered armies together.”

With a wave and a soft exhale, Keiko brushed her off. “That was decades ago,” she said calmly. “Nothing like that now. We’re old women, you and I, we ought to leave the world to the youngsters.”

“Right you are,” Yue Mei nodded along. “But is this sorcerer brat really someone we can leave the world to? He’s cursed, too, isn’t he? What kind of idiot gets themselves cursed?”

Keiko raised an eyebrow. “Hmmm? Didn’t I literally tear three blood-curses from you in a single afternoon once?”

At least the elder monk had the decency to blush at that. “Well, that’s different! I was infected by cultists!”

“My curse manifested spontaneously,” Mercury said. Then he considered his words, and grinned. “Actually, that’s not quite true. I think it might be indigestion, you see. I accidentally ate a sun or two, and I think the sky’s angry with me.”

Yue Mei paused. She stared at Mercury for a long moment, the perfectly calm and serene expression on his face. The way he stood there, hands clasped behind his back, carrying a pack that should have crushed him without much trouble these days.

The elder of the Skyflame Monks sighed softly, and pinched her nose under the veil. “I’m sorry, Keikei. We probably can’t help your apprentice.”

“Why is that?” Keiko asked, confused.

Yue Mei pointed at Mercury with an accusatory glare. “I fear your apprentice is wholly and entirely insane,” she said, speaking the declaration with all the gravitas of an execution.

Zyl instantly broke out into laughter, hastily nodding along. “The most unreasonable idiot I’ve ever met!”

Mercury didn’t even bother to defend himself.