

Chapter 280: Cult of Infernal Flames

“Hello,” Mercury said. “I’d like to join your cult.”

Chung Nam-Cheong stared at him. The young man, part of the Cult of the Infernal Flame, was just about to try to kill this pretentious, righteous looking wannabe cultivator. “Huh?” he asked instead, stunned into silence.

Mercury tilted his head. “Sorry, was I unclear? I’d like to see how your cult operates. Ideally from inside.”

“You wear pristine white robes and smell of privilege, old man,” Cheong-Bo said, sniffing the air and crinkling his face in disgust. “We’d eat you alive. You wouldn’t last a day in the kind of hell we’ve experienced. The people we take in are starving, rabid animals, in desperate need of a purpose, and that purpose is power.”

“Why power, though?” Mercury asked.

At that, the young man grinned, even as Mira smacked her forehead. “Power is vengeance,” he said. “Power is proof to the world that none of us are worthless, that we amount to more than anyone said. That we are not talentless.”

Mercury hummed in thought. “Talentless?”

Their discussion at the gate was drawing eyes. Chung Nam-Cheong was a guard at the southern gate of ice-flame. His yin-yang melding techniques were at the intermediate stage, but he was proficient enough to contribute to the cult in this way - and it was a safer thing to do in between extermination missions and attacks on the righteous sects.

But drawing eyes was dangerous. Being seen as easy picking by other disciples, making mistakes or similar, made one a target. Elders could withdraw resources, and it was easy to end up as a withered corpse, taken down by someone with too much bloodlust and too little sense.

So, Chung Nam-Cheong bit his lip, and shook his head. “Leave now,” he said, levering his spear at the righteous cultivator. “Or I will claim your blood essence to fuel myself.”

“Oh, please,” Mercury said, spreading his arms wide, invitingly. “Have a meal.”

Chung Nam-Cheong froze again, while the other righteous cultivator started snickering. The red-haired man in a pristine suit. A vein on his forehead throbbed, and Nam-Cheong felt anger course through his veins, igniting his meridians. "Are you mocking me?" he sneered. "I'll make you regret it."

Blueish, icy flames writhed along the length of his spear like a snake. The other disciples began grinning. Orphaned, mean-spirited kids, raised in a bloodthirsty area. They'd descend on the corpses like vultures, and internally, Nam-Cheong prepared to hand out a few beatings.

In a blink, he charged forward, stabbing his spear. "First ghostflame art," he breathed, fog streaming from his mouth, "Freezing Snake-Stab!"

His spear surged with renewed power, channelled from his legs up to his arms, delivered with a rotation of his hip. His blood-essence boiled, a hundred murders powering his strike. Killing was ingrained into his every muscle, even at the young age of twenty-one. He blitzed forward, excitement and anger mixing as he prepared to take yet another righteous heart.

But it was not to be.

Mercury, the righteous cultivator garbed in a stormy robe, brought up his hand. The motion was slow, but fast to Nam-Cheong's eyes. It was the kind of slowness an avalanche had, the kind of motion that came with the profundity of the ocean.

And in front of the ghostflame, the cultivator just smiled.

The spear slammed into the hand, drawing blood. It pierced the bone of the palm, and exited out the other side, grazing Mercury's throat, but it didn't go any further. The snake of cold fire slithered forward, only for those purple eyes to fix on it and go ephemeral for a moment.

A heartbeat passed. And then, the snake of ghostflame, slithered forward fearlessly, wrapping about the cultivator's arm - and then affectionately rubbing against his cheek. "What an elegant fusion of fire and ice," Mercury praised as Nam-Cheong stared in horror. His qi technique was dissolving even as it did no harm to this cultivator!

"Let's see, was it something like this...?" Mercury hummed. For a moment, his feet drifted, and he took up a stance, similar to Nam-Cheong. He breathed in, then out, and steam rose from his mouth. And he punched.

A snake of ghostly flame surged from his fist, and Nam-Cheong felt his blood freeze. Terror writhed in his bones. He flinched, but could only close his eyes, awaiting his doom.

Offending an elder, a greater cultivator, was like that. Today, he had pulled the short end of the stick, and that meant death. The martial world was unforgiving, after all.

So, he just closed his eyes, mourned his vengeance, and died.

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He opened his eyes. Why was he not dead yet. The snake of ghostflame just hovered in the air, staring at him with curiosity. Behind it, that righteous cultivator stood, tilting his head. "Are you brave or just stupid?" the man asked. "Run if someone tries to kill you, jeez."

Nam-Cheong blinked.

Relentlessly, the older cultivator prattled on, walking forward. The youth was too stunned to even lift his spear. The snake of ghostflame dissolved. "I mean, seriously," Mercury said, arms crossed behind his back. "Don't throw your life away like that, idiot. You've put in time and effort into learning techniques, the least you can do is prove worthy of them. Make this world a better place."

"Better?!" one of the children spat, a girl, barely eight years of age. She was clambering up the wooden palisade, bravely standing atop one of the logs, dressed in rags, and sneering down. "This worthless world rejected us long ago! All that's left is to destroy it!"

Mercury tilted his head. "Why?"

For a moment, the girl was stunned, but Nam-Cheong answered in her stead. "Fairness," he said simply. "The world was cruel to us. We deserve to be cruel back. It is our right and our honor to burn this rancid place to the ground."

"That seems extreme," Mercury said, scratching his beard. "Are all you cultists like that?"

"Driven by blood and murder?" Mira asked, her righteous attitude on full display. "Yeah, they are."

Nam-Cheong sneered at her, then spat on the ground before her feet. “Keep barking, pampered dog, and we’ll see if a spear suits your mouth as much as a silver spoon.”

With a gentle motion, Mercury whacked her head. It was just light enough to ruffle her hair, but Mira still flinched. “Don’t be rude now,” he said calmly, his eyes glinting with wisdom. “We’re here to understand. To make things better.”

“And how will you do that?” the palisade-girl demanded, her eyes distrusting and fearful, yet fueled by spite. “This world has nothing to offer us but misery!”

“Edgy,” Mercury hummed with a small smile. “I brought candy.” He brought out a glowing-red sugary sphere, holding it carefully between two fingers.

A moment passed, then another. Suddenly, Nam-Cheong found himself awash in a tide of bodies. “Me, me!” kids called all over. “I want the candy!”

Very carefully, Mercury passed it out to a lucky girl, and she stopped for a moment. “Is it poisoned?” she asked, with narrowed eyes - which was enough time for a boy to snatch it from her hand and stuff it into his mouth. “I don’t care if it’s poison! I’ll live my last moments without regret!” Tears poured down his cheek as he tasted the sugary treat. Mercury wated, arms crossed, curiosity in his eyes.

“I have more,” the righteous cultivator announced.

And Chung Nam-Cheong was forced into requesting a piece of candy, too.

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Chung Nam-Cheong was a Reforging-realm cultivator. Mercury took that comment in with his usual level of curiosity, asking about the realms, and getting swift answers.

Rusted-realm was for those beginning their cultivation journey. Then came Reforging, then Gilded. Then Golden-Core and Bladesoul after that.

Techniques came in different rarities, too. Ordinary, polished, earthen, heavenly. Their rarity or rank decided their efficiency. The speed at which they allowed their user to advance, the power at which they allowed their user to fight.

The ghostflame arts, used by Nam-Cheong, for example, were a polished-rank technique. And he had achieved first mastery in it, so he could perfectly execute the first step each tie he tried.

Something Mercury had done after glimpsing the technique only once - in addition to altering it from a spear-technique to a fist one. When cultivator Chung brought that up, the old monster just smiled awkwardly and scratched the back of his head. "Must've gotten lucky," he said, his storm robes warding the children from the rain.

Lucky.

There was no such thing as lucky. There were only the blessed and the ordinary. Chung was ordinary, third son of a piss-poor merchant family. They could not even afford to feed him, so he ran away. He ate scraps with rats, he stole from stands and got beatings from guards, and the righteous sects sneered at his lack of talent.

So, he was angry. Yes, he was angry with the world. He took up demonic techniques, because they did not rely on talent-

"Talent is a lie," Mercury said. Chung had not been talking out loud. But somehow, those words still left the old monster's mouth. "Talent is a lie," Mercury repeated.

"Yeah fucking right," Nam-Cheong said, staring at the ground and grimacing.

Instead of replying, the older man just smiled, leaving Chung Nam-Cheong to stew. His black robes billowed in the gentle breeze, his long, night-black hair moving gently. But despite his words, he considered that teaching. Old monsters rarely spoke, and when they did, their words were profound.

So, to have a lesson repeated when it was already given? It meant that at the very least, this person who was vastly stronger than Chung Nam-Cehong wanted him to ingrain it into his heart. "What realm are you, anyway?" he asked the righteous invader while sucking on a sweet sugary sphere.

"Mortal," the old monster replied, and Chung Nam-Cheong chuckled in reply.

"Yeah, right."

"It's true," Mercury said with a soft smile. It was gentle as a summer rain. "I come from the west."

Instantly, the infernal cultist's eyes went wide. "The west?!" he demanded. "Then you are an invader twice over!" he screamed, then jumped up, pointing his spear at Mercury's throat again.

Except, this time, the red-haired man shifted. His movement was full of power, so fast Chung couldn't even follow, and filled with the greatest yang-force he had seen in his entire life. For a moment, his world was in flames. For a moment, he had visions of the entire cult burning to ash in a crimson blaze.

Instead, a hand gently settled on the haft on his spear, pressing down until the bladed tip sank into the dirt. "Please refrain from threatening my boyfriend," Zyl said politely.

Chung swallowed dryly. His fear froze his bones again. "I- uh-"

"Zyl, you scared the kid," Mercury laughed.

"Wait you are...?" the kid asked.

"Dating? Yes," Mercury said happily, hopping up to his feet and wrapping his hands around Zyl. "Happily so, even."

The monster that had just given Chung visions of his doom and that of everyone who had ever given him a chance in life, leaned into the embrace with a small and a chuckle. "You're incorrigible," he said, then kissed the other man on the cheek.

Chung blinked, then nodded. "Right," he said. "I see. How do you... balance your yin-yang energies?" he asked.

Mercury snickered. "By talking about our problems," he said calmly. "That's the key to a happy relationship. Talking things over."

Once more, Nam-Cheong blinked. Then, one of the kids punched him in the shoulder. It was palisade-girl, with muddy hair and muddier clothes. She grinned, though. "I had two dads before they got murked," she said casually. "Stop being a weirdo."

Defeated, Chung Nam-Cheong could only nod. The world was wider than he expected, and there was much for him to learn, it seemed. Perhaps he should try it sometime.

Absent-mindedly, he took another sweet, to the great chagrin of the dozen younger kids fighting for it. And for a while, they just sat and talked.

It wasn't even martial topics. Simple, human conversation instead. Such as "what is the nicest meal you've ever had" or "when was the last time you showered" and "don't you get cold in winter?"

Such a simple amount of care, and yet, it was more than Chung had received in his life. He stared, as the old monsters laughed at the children, and leisurely handed out cloaks of heavy fabrics from who-knows where. They seemed woven from intricate streaks of grass.

Chung wrapped his night-sky coloured cultist robes a little tighter, feeling almost out of place amongst the children, now clad in green. "Alice would love this," Mercury hummed.

"Who is Alice?" Chung asked.

"A friend of mine," Mercury replied casually. "A heroine."

Those words echoed in Chung's mind. A heroine. Was it possible? Were there truly kind people in this world? Within seconds, this old monster had spared his life - something he now owed a blood-debt for. They had given out food and clothing, seemingly out of the simple fun of it. Even when he had offended them, he had gotten away with nothing but a burst of intent and a warning.

"I-"

"What is this?"

A voice came from the skies. It was a furious, droning voice, and an old woman with billowing hair hung in the sky. Her mane was like a furious thundercloud, grey-black strands casting a shadow over Chung's face. Instantly, his blood froze. "Elder Guleum!" Chung gasped.

The old woman fixed him with a stare like a lightning bolt. His blood froze, and fear lanced through him. Chung Nam-Cheong froze in fear. Even just staring at her was making the cold flames in his blood act up, and he writhed in agony.

"What is the meaning of this?" elder Guleum asked again, her voice as cold as a blizzard and as sharp as a sword.

Chung's words died in his throat. He could not bear to raise his voice to an elder. He could not move, not speak, he felt like a mouse in front of a tiger. And then, suddenly, the weight disappeared.

"I'm simply learning a bit about the demonic cult," Mercury said. The man in the white robes sat calmly, unbothered by elder Guleum's rage. The old woman fixed her fierce gaze on him, and Chung felt tides of killing intent spill forth. The kind that would make him shrivel like an aged prune, that made his hair stand on end on pure proximity, yet the man just sat.

"We kill righteous dogs here," the elder said. Her voice was calm, but her words promised violence.

Mercury calmly tilted his face. "I am no member of the righteous sects."

"You wear white."

"Are cultists not known for lying and cheating? What tells you I am not simply in disguise?" he asked.

"If you disguise yourself before me, then I ought to teach you a lesson, boy," elder Guleum said, stroking her chin with a vicious grin. "Your blood essence will make a nice meal for me."

With her words, her hair writhed, strands moving like dark thunder, streaking through the air as though alive. A moment passed, and the foreigner just tilted his head. "I see," he said calmly. "You really should work on your hospitality."

The elder sneered. "I will show hospitality to your corpse."

And then, her hair surged forward - and instantly caught fire.

Zyl hung in the air, a pair of leathery wings spread from his back. A demonic technique? Chung had seen such wings before, on elder flying demon. Was this a mimicry of that technique? The elder's wings were purple, rather than red...

In the blink that the thought took Chung, elder Guleum's cloud of hair was reduced to nothing but a bob-cut.

She stared at the floating figure, slowly flapping his wings, and the demonic master stared back. "Can we like, talk now?" Zyl asked, smiling brightly.

Very slowly, and with a shaky motion, the elder clasped her fists together and bowed. "Elder Guleum Pi-Haneul greets the esteemed master."

"None of that!" Mercury said, waving a hand as the kids hid behind him, hoping to escape the elder's wrath. Despite everything, despite having nearly been killed and having had his life threatened, he still wore a calm expression. Chung watched as he pulled out a *teapot* from his robes, and lit a small fire on the earthen floor. Then, he gestured for elder Guleum to take a seat. "Come, let us talk."

The look on the aged woman's face was worth a thousand lashings, Chung thought.

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“What is the meaning of this?!” grand-elder Yozai of the peak of frozen blood demanded.

Mercury responded by calmly throwing a teacup at his face.

Okay, maybe “calmly” is generous-

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“Good tea,” grand elder Yozai praised.

“Good tea,” elder Guleum praised.

“Good tea,” Chung Nam-Cheong praised.

“Can I have juice?” palisade-girl asked.

Mercury rolled his eyes and poured even more sugar into her tea. “There, that’s basically juice anyway.” The girl happily brought the clay cup to her lips again, giddily giggling as she drank.

“You are from the west, then?” elder Guleum asked.

Mercury nodded.

“Some kind of... sorcerer?” grand elder Yozai asked with a raised eyebrow.

Mercury shrugged, then nodded again. “Sure,” he said. “Sorcerer works.”

“You truly have no cultivation base?” palisade-girl asked.

“None at all,” Mercury nodded. “My Skills are different, but no less strong. There are a million paths in life. The task is not picking the most commonly tread one, it is finding one for you.”

At that, the elders quieted. “Profound,” Chung Nam-Cheong whispered.

“The heck you mean ‘profound’?” Mercury laughed. “This is basic advice!”

No one graced that with an answer. It might’ve been basic, but when truly considered, who wanted to be a trailblazer, really? It was all about stepping in footsteps, making people proud. Just chasing a fad was something no one did.

Yet, somehow, it was something that had worked out for the sorcerer. He came here, to this land, instantly made their elders kowtow, then served them tea. Chung could not judge things properly, but he saw the way the elders swirled the liquid.

It was milky and a faint green, but they simply kept staring at it. Chung took another sip, feeling the aroma suffuse his bones with calm. It was a brew that made the whole world feel distant and unimportant. An attitude that was so simple it was laughable.

"Be happy," the tea whispered. "Be kind."

And that was all. It went against so many of the teachings of the cult. He was meant to be bloodthirsty, the ghostflame technique demanded it devour the flesh of other cultivators to raise his mastery. He fed on blood essence to grow himself, and he'd struck down no less than a dozen righteous scions who had come to their territory to exterminate them.

In short, Chung was not a good person. He was a mass-murderer. He was a ruthless, brutally efficient killer, and an inner disciple of the peak of killing cruelty. Even now, as he sat, his body was covered in barely-healed cuts, and yet, he sat with elders.

Elders who should have flogged him for forsaking his guard duty. Elders he should have kowtowed to a hundred times for even looking their way. But they simply forgot about him, staring at the tea instead, and the stranger just snickered at their antics.

"It's just tea," he said. "Nothing so profound."

But the mirthful glint in his eyes spoke volumes of a different world. Chung knew that this sorcerer from the west was far different from anyone he had ever met. He was so far removed from the conflict of the lying righteous ones and the spurned vengeance of the cults. What a strange man, Chung found himself thinking.

And he wanted to know more.

"May I show you around the Cult of the Infernal Flame, esteemed sorcerer?" Chung asked.

"Call me Mercury," the man in white robes said. The man who had mastered techniques in a single gaze, who had beaten elders without lifting a finger, who had silenced them with nothing but tea. "And yes, I'd love to see more of the cults."

Somehow, the world felt a little quieter when he was around.