

Chapter 278: A Lesson

“What even *are* you?” matriarch Joo Sung demanded.

“A cultivator,” Mercury said with a shrug.

Joo Jidong stared, wide-eyed at the remnants of the clash. All that remained was a trickle of metallic blood on the ground. “Fascinating,” he said. “You must have a strong metal qi technique. Are those the iron-forged bones of the Yun clan?”

Smiling softly, Mercury shook his head. “No clan,” he replied. “I am but a rogue cultivator. No leaders, no ancestry or lineage. I stand by my own strength, and by that imbued in me by those who taught me. These bones I learnt from my smithing teacher.”

“Tell us the name of this esteemed blacksmith,” matriarch Sung said, her eyes still narrowed on Mercury.

Once more, the mopaaw just shook his head. “No,” he said. “I will not.”

Matriarch Sung narrowed her eyes even further, still holding her glaive. “You stand in the hall of our ancestors, boy,” she said. “You will tell me what I wish to know or face the wrath of a hundred generations of the Joo clan.”

Zyl snickered at that, and she turned her glare at the dragon. Defensively, he raised his palms. “Hey, hey, don’t give me that look. It’s just funny. Like, do you want us to kill your ancestors over this?”

“You dare?!” matriarch Sung hissed, stepping forward.

Sighing, Zyl stepped at her as well. “I dare,” he said. “I tire of this charade, so I dare. Let us exchange pointers if you will.”

The old woman gritted her teeth, baring them as she spun her glaive. “Very well,” she said. “Let me-” she swung before she finished the sentence.

The dragon grabbed the glaive by the blade, stopping the swing dead in its tracks.

Matriarch Sung stared. Joo Jidong stared. Zyl gently closed his palm around the metal, then flicked his wrist, snapping off the blade. Matriarch Sung's eyes widened, and Zyl carefully handed over the blade to Mercury.

The mopaaw gave a thin smile at that, making a show of it. "My, how incredible. A lump of refined spirit iron. Truly, what a rare treasure. To find it *laying around*," he said, fixing the old woman with a glint in his eyes. "How fortunate."

For just a moment, matriarch Sung bared her teeth, looking ready to launch herself at the dragon, when Joo Jidong stepped in front of her. The old man's face was weary. Tired of this charade. Matriarch Sung just barely halted herself from crashing through his frail frame. "Joo Jidong, what is the meaning of this?" she demanded.

And the doctor sighs. He turns to the matriarch with tired eyes, exhaustion set into his bones. "Cease this violence," he said.

"You dare give me orders?" the woman bit back.

Joo Jidong stared at her for a long moment, then shook his head. "No," he said. "That was not an order. It is a request. There is no point to this violence. They are right. We have been killing and sending children to their deaths to get our clan more wealth. There must be an end to this. There must be."

Joo Sung sneered. "There is an end - once the Yung clan is finished. Once all their lands are ours and the Joo clan prospers."

Shaking his head, Joo Jidong's eyes turned glassy and wet. "No," he said. "No, that cannot be the end of it. We cannot keep up this violence."

"We must," matriarch Sung insisted.

"I refuse," the old physician said with a bone-deep sigh. He took a deep breath, standing up a little straighter, even as his bent spine creaked. "I refuse." He repeated the words and it was like a spell lifting from him, a stone falling off his heart. Palpable relief coursed through his weary bones. "It ends now."

Joo Sung stared at him. "You cannot refuse your matriarch!"

Shrugging, Joo Jidong smiled. "Or what? You will throw me out of the clan? You will kill me? I am an old man, Sung-er. I was an adult when you were born. What do I still have? A few meagre years?" He shook his head. "It matters not. I tire. Kill me if you must."

And that, for the first time, made the old woman hesitate. Her grip tightened on the shaft of her broken glaive, knuckles whitening as her teeth ground against each other. She was angry. At the world, at the audacity of those who refused her. In one single day her world, her status-quo had been upturned.

But there was no outlet for that anger. She could scream and cry as much as she wanted, but there was no point. No outcome in which it would go any better than this. In rage, all she did was scream and slam the shaft of her broken weapon into the ground.

Stone cracked, and tiny splinters of rock dug into Mercury's skin. But he still just stood and watched. His eyes were on the woman, his hands folded behind his back. This was a temper tantrum, nothing more. So long as she stopped their pointless little war, he was happy to let her be.

"Get out," the woman eventually managed.

For a long moment, Mercury was silent, watching her. Seeing the way her face contorted in rage and grief. And then, with a shrug, he grabbed Mira, slinging the unconscious girl over his shoulder, and turned. Zyl and Joo Jidong soon followed. They walked across the thresholds, and the attendants outside quickly turned to them.

Mercury waved them off, sitting on the ground, leaning against one of the stone walls of this place. Slowly, he turned to Joo Jidong. "Why'd you do it?" he asked, casually.

The old physician flinched for a moment, as if torn from a trance, then turned to Mercury. "Huh?" he asked, then shook his head. "Oh, it's... because little Ina was miserable," he said, helplessly raising his hands. "She was miserable here. The expectations of the family, of the martial world, they were too much. She failed in her training, admonished by her tutors, mocked for failing talents as the direct heir... and so she wanted to run."

He turned to Mercury, helplessly. "What was I to do?" he asked, voice cracking. "Let that little girl suffer? Put in a world that didn't accept her? I raised her like my own granddaughter, cultivator Starlight. And to see her crying, asking me to help..." he grimaced. "I could not turn her down."

Nodding gently, Mercury just sighed. "Being soft-hearted is no sin," he said. "This world could use more kindness. But as you live, it is your duty to grieve the blood spilled over this."

"Every day," Joo Jidong whispered. "Every day I grieve it."

Cruelly, Mercury shook his head. "You do not," he said. "But you will."

"What?" Joo Jidong asked, not knowing what he meant, but Mercury didn't elaborate anymore. He just waved a hand. Then, the mopaaw closed his eyes, and waited.

- - -

It took about an hour for matriarch Sung to leave the chamber. Eventually, she stepped out, looking a half decade older. She sighed, and looked at Mercury for a moment, before just waving her hand. With that, he and Zyl rose to their feet, and soon, they had blindfolds wrapped around their eyes again.

For a little while, Mercury wondered if they'd try to assassinate them. But surprisingly, nothing happened. No knives in his back, no one trying to cut his head off. Instead, the walk was just quiet and sombre.

After a little trip up the stairs, it was dark in the entrance hall. Many of the elders that had welcomed them before were already gone. Mira was sleeping soundly in her room, and matriarch Sung sat tiredly in her damaged throne. It had not yet been fixed. Her fingers tapped rhythmically on the part of the wood that was still intact, and by now, a scowl had found its way back to her face.

"I am unhappy with you," she said simply, at Mercury.

He just nodded. "Of course, I imagine you would be."

"You come in and upturn my entire clan in a single day," she said. "You undermine my authority. You make my physician betray me. You give me no face in the slightest."

"That seems like an exaggeration," Mercury said with a pout.

Joo Sung just scoffed at him. "It may be. But that is your burden to bear." Then, for a long time, she remained silent, eventually giving another small sigh. "I will send an envoy to the Yung clan to let them know come morning. They will meet here soon." Then, she waved a hand, dismissing them. "Go. Someone will guide you to a guest room. Leave me be."

Nodding faintly, Mercury let himself be walked off. And then, with a final motion, the large doors shut on the old woman, leaving her alone in the dark.

- - -

When Mercury awakened, it was to a ray of sunshine lazily crawling through a window. It tickled his nose for a moment, then heated it up, and soon, his skin burned and sizzled. That's when he quickly hid underneath a blanket.

"Zyl," he said, shaking his boyfriend. "Zyl, the sun is being really mean to me."

The dragon stirred awake with lazy motions, slowly cracking open an eye. "Hmmm?" he hummed in question, voice still raspy and sleep-drunk. "Mmmh," he hummed a second later, sprouting wings and spreading them wide. The red, leathery appendages quickly hid Mercury from the sunlight, at least enough to let him put on his veil and manifest his robe. Then, he cast a small spell to cover the window.

And for a little while longer, he let the world mind its own business.

Around midday, perhaps a little after that, though, someone was at his door. "Hello?" Mira demanded from the other side, banging her fist against the wood. "Hellooo?!"

Sighing softly, Mercury dragged himself out of bed fully. His robe wove itself from stormclouds, and the black metal of his pants rippled as he walked. He smelled of ozone and hunger. And then, he pulled open the door.

Joo Mira yelped as the wood she'd been leaning on disappeared and almost fell, catching herself at the last moment with a superhuman step. "You stepped on my toes," Mercury noted drily.

Instantly, the girl flushed and pulled back, standing up ramrod straight and saluting him. "Apologies, esteemed cultivator!" she yelled. "I've been assigned as your caretaker for this stay and wanted to apologize for my tardiness, as I was still unconscious!"

Mercury raised an eyebrow. "You're sorry for... being knocked out?" he asked.

"Yes, sir!" Mira said instantly, the tips of her ears flushing red. "I bring shame to my family, I will accept any punishment-"

Waving his hand, Mercury clapped her on the shoulder. "All forgiven. There are no grudges from these guests." For a moment, the girl's eyes widened, but then she rapidly nodded. Before she could say something about duty or honor, though, Mercury spoke again. "So, what has you in such an uproar?"

She stared at him for a long moment, then slouched a bit, that tiredness he'd grown used to from her sneaking the way back into the interaction. "The matriarch," she said. "She's sent a

message to the Yung clan. They're set to arrive here in only an hour. I wanted to tell you so that you esteemed guests could get ready."

Mercury smiled. "Why, what would outsiders like us be doing at a meeting between the Joo and Yung clans? Surely we'd be unwanted."

Instantly, Mira stammered, looking for words, until Zyl snickered, wrapped his arms around Mercury's neck, and spoke. "Stop bullying the kid, Mercury," he drawled, then turned to Mira. "We'll be ready. Could you pick us up in an hour?" he asked, and Mira hastily nodded, then shut the door on them.

"An hour?" Mercury asked, raising an eyebrow.

Zyl laughed softly, then nodded, pinching the mopaaw's cheek. "That's if I hurry, you rascal. Not all of us can just wear a veil. Some of us need to 'put in effort' and 'look good' or something." Already, he was pulling make-up and hair-gel from his inventory, leaving Mercury to relax for just a little while longer as his boyfriend got ready.

Then, an hour later, Mira led them downstairs into the entry hall.

- - -

Yung NamJi, patriarch of the Yung clan, was a severe looking man. His hair was a shale shade of grey, like rock, and his robes did an elegant job at hiding his bulky frame. Stern eyes were fixed on matriarch Sung while his hand absent-mindedly brushed his short beard.

"So, you say this poisoning was a fake," he repeated the matriarch's words.

"Yes," Joo Sung confirmed.

Patriarch NamJi hummed solemnly at that, giving a grave nod. "So all your fighting, this entire time, has been unlawful?"

At that, matriarch Sung bristled. "No," she said. "That is untrue."

"Ah, but didn't you conduct a first raid on our territories because of this offense? To reclaim face?" he asked. "Perhaps it would have done you better to simply investigate properly, Joo Sung."

The old woman grit her teeth in anger. Already, disrespect was being tossed as easily as rotten fish. "Our first attack was out of line, yes," she admitted. "But after that it was all fine. Your counterattack gave us ample reason to continue the fight."

"A fight that only started because you let your own heir fool you," Yung Namji harshly accused.

Shaking his head, Mercury sighed. "You did the same," he said calmly. "Your scion orchestrated the poisoning."

The old man narrowed his eyes at the sudden incursion, and an elder behind him took up the word. "We exiled our young master! Whatever was his business is his business, not the clan's!" she demanded.

"Untrue," matriarch Sung said. "If your young master did this, helped our little Ina escape, then you should have made him say the truth. You exiled him for something he did not do. By that, you insult yourself and you insult him."

Scoffing, the Yung clan leader retorted swiftly. "Are you defending our young master's honor now? A child whose death you called for?"

Joo Sung bared her teeth, leaning forward. "If his family won't do it, then I suppose it falls upon the Joo clan to show him face."

"You are courting death!" Yung Namji spat, taking a step forward. Killing intent filled the chamber.

"We are doing the opposite!" matriarch Sung said, standing from her throne. "We are asking you to end this pointless feud!"

"Show us some face first!" another elder of the Yung clan demanded. "We want fifty kilogram of spirit iron ore, five-thousand gold coins, the Xein district-

Matriarch Sung slammed her foot down, silencing them. "You ask for the hair on my head, you greedy old vulture!" she bellowed. "The Joo clan will pay reparations to you, but be *reasonable!*"

For a little while longer, the elders and clan leaders spat insults back and forth. Mercury watched in some amount of frustration as brokering a trade deal seemed, frankly, impossible. The Yung clan demanded outrageous sums, and the Joo clan wanted to save money wherever they could.

“How did they even survive this long?” Mercury wondered, whispering to himself.

Instantly, a hundred faces with enhanced hearing turned to him, their frowns and chilling killing intent spilling forth like a tidal wave of anger. It felt like a dozen swords were at his throat.

“What did you say, worm?! Who even are you?” Yung NamJi bellowed.

Mercury tilted his head softly, then smiled. He gracefully cupped his fist, and gave a tiny nod of his head. “I am but a rogue cultivator, current guest of the Joo clan. A travelling blacksmith if you will.”

The Yung clan patriarch sneered at that declaration. “A rogue cultivator? You dare? You are courting death!” he said, head red in fury. “Kowtow to me three times right now, and I’ll consider forgiving you.”

“No,” Mercury said, calmly.

For a brief moment, Yung Namji’s left eye twitched. Then, the temperature in the room dropped to freezing. Ice pressed against Mercury’s skin, the inevitability of steel and death tickling his nose.

He sneezed.

“Boy,” patriarch NamJi said, the words a threat from his lips. “Show us some face. We are the Yung clan, rulers of the-”

“Hey,” Mercury interrupted, still wearing that same smile, that same cold, calm voice. “Shut the fuck up, yeah?”

Dead silence.

“What did you say, landless worm?!” Yung NamJi demanded.

“I told you to shut your ugly mouth, old man,” Mercury said with a sigh, purposely provoking him. “You’ve told me to kowtow, and it pisses me off. People don’t bow to their lessers. I will never kneel, especially not to some washed-up has-been nobody shitstain like you, fucker. Your mother should be ashamed for giving birth to you.”

With every word he spoke, Mercury watched the patriarch's face go redder as the elders of the Joo clan turned paler and paler. The temperature in the room dropped even further, the killing intent so strong that even elders began to stagger back from Yung NamJi.

"Worm," the old man hissed through gritted teeth. "Tell me your name. I will butcher your family for seven generations and drape your entrails across this hall."

"Make a bet with me," Mercury said calmly. "Just a small bet. If you manage to touch me with that sword of yours, I'll kowtow to you. Thrice," he said. "But if you cannot touch me, then you will accept reparations of 500 gold coins and leave this. End this pointless feud. No more war, no more butchering of children."

"Bet," the old man said, anger still flooding his veins. "Let everyone hear this! The rogue cultivator has accepted an honorable duel! The conditions are clear to everyone in this room!" he bellowed, drawing his sword. A crushing pressure descended on Mercury, and people around the room gasped.

"He has reached enlightenment!" one of the Joo elders said, mouth gaping open. "The Heaven's Press technique must be weighing a hundred tons, now!"

A sinister smile spread on the old man's face as he strode towards Mercury. The wooden floorboard cracked under the effects of his technique - and Mercury wondered about it. Was it metal aspected? Gravity, perhaps? The magic had a strange feeling to it, one he couldn't quite place.

It was heavy, terribly heavy even. But at the same time, that heaviness was split - only half of it was physical. The other half pressed on his mind. It was an illusion of weariness, a spiritual pressure of lethargy. What a curious little technique, Mercury thought.

Then he stood up from his chair.

For a moment, no one spoke. Then, the first of the Elders yelled at the sight. "He stands! He stands under the Heaven's Press!"

Frowning, Yung NamJi sped up. "This is nothing!" he said, his sword already trailing a beautiful arc through the air. The first form of the Yung family's swordsmanship - the <Heaven Upturning Wheel> - crashed through the room, carving across the floorboards, splitting wood and sending splinters flying.

Tilting his head softly, Mercury triggered <Astral Advent>.

His mind blossomed out of itself. Mercury hatched from within the egg that was his own idea of limits. He thought, and his <Oceanic Consciousness> overclocked. The world slowed down. Time became an illusion, a quaint little thing that his thoughts moved independently of.

[<Astral Advent> has levelled up! <Astral Advent lv. 4 -> 5>]

Already, his eyes peered into the technique. He watched carefully as the seconds ticked by, a small headache spreading behind his eyes, and yet he paid attention. He felt awake, alive, as he always did in moments like this.

Mercury was merciful. He was kind. But he wasn't a pushover.

This man had, very genuinely, pissed him off. He could handle being talked down to. Insulted, belittled, all of that was fine. But told to kneel? He drew his border there. Oberon had paid for the same request, and this old man intended to take his respect by force?

He was not old enough for that. One would need to be at least as old as old Uunrahzil to earn Mercury's respect, and for that, even this fossil was born too soon. In an instant, all his minds solidified. Walls of horribly solid rijin grew in the air like flowers. They should have cascaded - each one weaker than the last, but Mercury did not allow it.

Not this time. He felt it right then. A strange resonance.

For a day, Mercury had slept well. He was rested, fresh, and had been in good spirits. Then those spirits were ruined. He saw the entire world laid out of him, and felt his own internals more than ever before. Until now, his minds had always been *cascading*. One step after another.

But, right now, after that sleep, in this world of slowed time, he felt they were all a little similar. And right now, he didn't let any of them be weak or strong. They were all the same.

His rezil shaped reality. His will to alter the world.

There was a resonance between his zeyjin - the split parts of his mind. A resonance with the world, and that was when he found that rezil did not care about *reason*. It cared about possibility, about connection. And what was more connected than his own mind to itself.

One moment passed. His zeyjin, all of them, tuned to perfect harmony. They resonated with each other, and their amplitudes grew endlessly. Soon, he could not see the difference anymore, and in a moment, *cascading* became *resonant*.

[Ystirs: 128/64/32/16/8 -> 128 x 5

Zejyn: 5, Cascading -> *Resonant*

Rijn: Malleable, Adamant, Anchored

Ihn'ar: Effortless, 3rd Veil

Rezil: Alteration, Concept Synchronized]

And, in a moment, his minds grew stronger yet. Mercury smiled, happy at finding yet more depth within himself. And, all at once, he summed his rijn, all five of them, all equally strong, solid plates of invisible will. On top of that, he grabbed patriarch NamJi with all the hand his <Force of the Hecatoncheires> offered.

Only then did he let time resume.

[<Oceanic Consciousness> has levelled up! <Oceanic Consciousness lv. 9 -> 10>]

[<Oceanic Consciousness> has met the necessary qualifications for evolution. Evolve? (800 Skill points)]

In that single moment, the spinning blade that was patriarch NamJi crashed into Mercury's rijn. A hundred hands of force wrapped around him, and his spin dragged, then crashed. His sword aura, enhanced by enlightenment and decades of training met Mercury's rijn - and faltered.

The metal blade dragged, crashed, and cracked. Brutally, the blade wrenched itself from the old man's hands, slamming into another one of the invisible barriers. It was brutal and violent, and the old man crashed into the barrier only a moment later.

His bones did about as well as one could reasonably expect. They didn't break, but there was a snap of ligaments breaking as his limbs were pushed to flex too far, brought to their limits. The old man let out a pitiful huff as the air was knocked from his lungs. One moment to another, the trail of splinters and destruction through the hall stopped.

One moment to another, patriarch NamJi went from being a brutal bringer of death to a ragdoll.

Silence hung thick in the air. Mercury broke it with his steps. Still holding onto the elder with his ghost hands, he dispelled his rijn, and the old man's sword weakly dropped down. Mercury gingerly caught it out of the air, and smiled politely.

"How surprising," he said. "I just so happened to find a lump of hundred-year fire silver here. How lucky."

Elders gnashed their teeth around the hall, but no one spoke. Might made right in the martial world, after all, so even when the blatant lie and theft made their blood boil, they had no words for it.

Very slowly, Mercury lowered patriarch NamJi down to his level. Very gently, he reached out a hand, and triggered <Truth>. "You have no injuries," Mercury said.

<Medicine>, absorbed into <Unravel>, hummed to life. Power flooded out of Mercury, and there was a second sickening noise as the old man suddenly went right back to how he'd been beforehand. His ankles went back in place, his fingers turned limber once more. Even longer aches, an old injury to his back, and a pulled muscle from a long forgotten fight... all of them were restored.

And then, Mercury set him down. Patriarch NamJi stared at the mopaaw with unadulterated shock. His mouth hung open.

For his own part, Mercury just smiled, then patted the old man's shoulder. "Well," he said happily. "Seems like you don't have a sword anymore! We can go again, of course, if you want." Mercury said, a glint in his eyes.

The clan leader shook his head.

Smiling happily, Mercury nodded. "That's what I thought. Take your reparations and be peaceful now, yes?" he said gently, patting the man again, then turned to matriarch Sung. "And do be sure to pay the five-hundred gold. I wouldn't want to need to come back."

Finally, he addressed the entire hall. "I have solved this petty feud for you. Hopefully, from today onward, your families won't spill blood against each other anymore. Learn to be peaceful. Learn a little humility. There are mountains beyond the mountains. Do not lose sight of your goals for your greed."

His words were met with silence, and he said one more thing as Zyl rose from his chair. "And remember," Mercury spoke. His voice was quiet, but impactful, ringing heavily through the

hall. "Be kind to each other. Remember this lesson, remember that cultivator Starlight serves no one. Comes from nowhere. And that he kneels to no one."

With that, he gave them a wave, and then walked off, Zyl soon joining by his side. Mercury wore a thin smile, his built up annoyance like a leaf in the wind. Shame that he wouldn't get to do more smithing.

But they did donate some wonderful materials out of the kindness of their heart, and he also had a new Skill to evolve. And more places to see. The future was still bright.

"Senior!" Mira called. "Wait!"

Mercury decidedly started walking faster.