

Chapter 310: In a Crater

The disciples among the skyflame monks had long since grown used to the presence of the stranger in their courtyard. He meditated, practiced with them, and his movements were often so profound it was shocking. The enigmatic man was suitable enough to practice the most basic techniques with an elder, and mastered them in moments.

Many of them held conflicting feelings. Jealousy and admiration, gratitude and dissatisfaction. He had not gone through the steps, the gruelling practice they had, but he also let them learn from him, and prevented accidents. He had stitched some of them back together with his own hands when they charred bits of their body.

So, when the veiled stranger was absent one day, they noticed. He had simply disappeared one morning, dashing up into the sky. How the man had grown wings so spontaneously wasn't something any of the apprentices could answer. But they did observe something.

A few minutes after the stranger flew into the sky, it began to rain ash.

Charcoal black, carbon flakes dropped from the sky. They coated the ground in a faint layer of soot, coming apart in the wind.

A few minutes later, the rain of ash continued, alongside a noise like a thunderclap. For a brief moment, white sparkles joined the rain, and the elders shooed the kids inside. The sparkles, fragments of the Chaotic Heaven, apparently, hissed when they touched the ground. They'd coat and crawl and consume for a moment, before fizzling out, each of them scouring the grass for about a meter in diameter, falling like faint snow.

Luckily, no one got hurt, but it did make the elders look upwards with worry. It wasn't long after that, when things changed again. The thunderclaps were replaced with great roars like those of dying dragons. A noise so earth shattering it rattled one's bones all the way on the ground.

The apprentices could feel their very bones shake, and when looking into the sky, they saw it. The sun itself *flickered*. Bright flashes of light jumped from its surface to the surrounding air. It was so bright that it looked as though there was a second sun in the sky, the glow so all-consuming it cast the world into perfect illumination.

For about twelve minutes, there was not a single shadow cast on the ground. Regularly, the sun and entire sky would light up with the kind of light that might make one go blind if they looked upwards.

Elders, even the leader of the monastery, looked up with anxiety. They feared that *something* might fall, and it was easy to see the fires playing along their palms, the qi running through their meridians. Yet, the most tense one among the crowd was the second stranger. A handsome, red-haired man.

He was quiet, usually tending to the gardens or drawing, and had a rather meek demeanor. The students saw him train, yes, but the weights looked small enough, if oddly coloured. Still, the man struck them as unworrying.

And yet, no one stood near him.

No disciple, deacon or elder of the monastery dared approach him. The stranger simply stared up at the sky, not averting his gaze when the flashes should have blinded him. His fists were clenched tight, tendons showing under his skin, and his jaw was set. There was a palpable tension to him.

Then, after those twelve minutes, for another few moments, the sky went quiet. Light didn't drift down. The ash rain reduced. It was quiet as any other day, and yet, the tension didn't change. It was still there, an undercurrent in the air, a faint static making hairs stand on end.

It lasted three minutes. Three minutes of tense, scary quiet.

After that, the sun vanished.

For thirty seconds, the sky went black. It was from one moment to the other. There was a shift of colour over the sun, and then it was gone, casting the world into perfect nighttime. The stars shone down beautifully, glimmering as tiny lights. It would've been pretty, if there wasn't some distinct terror about it.

There is comfort in routine. In knowing that there is solidity in the world. That the sun will rise every day, that another day might come.

For thirty seconds, that security, that routine was ripped away. In the middle of the day, the sun was removed. Not eclipsed, but simply blotted out from the sky. Disappeared entirely, as if swallowed by some sort of giant monster.

It was a primal fear. The fear of a change so large one couldn't run away. There was nothing to fight, nothing to run from. The light was simply gone.

The stranger's eyes widened as he saw it. Unlike everyone else, the sight made him almost hopeful. As if it was something to look forward to, as if the cold darkness couldn't harm him, as if, unlike everyone else, he wouldn't freeze to death.

Confidence born from the privilege of being strong. No, not the privilege. In this world, everyone could grow strong. To be born weak was not an excuse, it was simply a small setback. The heights were there to reach, and the path up to the heavens was clear to all cultivators.

Climb. Challenge the heavens, acquire new Skills and techniques, raise your cultivations, level up and climb. All the way up into the sky, like the stranger that swallowed the sun had done, like the stranger that calmly stared into the void of stars had done.

Somehow, without the sun in the sky, the primal terror still fled at the flame that ignited in the hearts of hundreds of apprentices.

And then, the light returned. The stranger's face shifted from hope to horror. "No," he whispered.

Nothing changed after that, and the world was normal again. Nothing, except that a single object fell from the sky, so small it was almost unnoticeable. And yet, someone saw.

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It had been a long, long time since old Dreamweaver talked to another student. Mercury had never asked them to teach another, and even now, Mercury had not really made a request. Old Uunrahzil had simply seen someone in need of teaching and given a single lesson.

Frankly, the old one did not care overmuch for this new student. Assessing character is one of the things old Uunrahzil prided themselves on. They were good at estimating whether someone would take their lessons to heart. And Illuhm, the sun, was unlikely to change.

Born as an arrogant and envious creature, it had reigned from high above at all times. Teaching perspective to someone, something so stuck in its ways, was difficult. It was hard to even think of Illuhm as a person, really, even to the patient soul.

And yet, Uunrahzil taught a lesson. The lesson of <Breath>, as was their usual first word taught. It was a good starting point to dive into ihn'ar, to peel back the veils, to learn to shift the lo'pac and unravel the mysteries that hid in their many layers. It was a word of peace and of acceptance.

Perhaps, teaching it to the sun would make a difference, and perhaps it would not. Old Uunrahzil's found their own optimism to be... limited. And they had always been a believer in the good at the heart of everyone. Perhaps they were being too judgmental. Time would tell, at any rate.

For now, at least, that lesson was good enough to get the curse lifted from their student. To witness that change had been quite something. Seeing Illuhm go from arrogance to jealousy. He was both, usually, of course, but in this case, one dominated, and drove his reaction in totality.

Now, his jealousy burned bright still, and he wanted to steal from Mercury. But theft was not annihilation. It was, despite everything, a shift in attitude. Rather than destructive rivals, they may build each other up until one of them broke.

Old Uunrahzil found humor in the thought.

Until one of them broke? If that was the case, then they needn't worry. They knew, more than most, that Mercury...

No, that Yr'enzel, their star of hope, would never break.

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When Mercury awoke, he lay broken-bodied in a heap of blood and bones and ash.

He didn't even have crusty eyes to blink open, like he might have after an evening out drinking, but he sure had the mother of all hangovers. He tried to open his mouth to curse, then found he didn't have a mouth at all, actually. Then he wanted to laugh.

His head hurt. His mind, really, hurt. It was like his every brain cell had been flayed open with a cheese grater. And still, he found it funny.

<Babbling Brook> was carrying away all his emotions. He felt raw, disillusioned, and like the world was caked in dust. He didn't have the capacity for joy, not really, and at that moment, his love for the world was entirely buried beneath layers of grit and ash. He felt like sandpaper had been applied to his nerves.

But he still, even when his love, his sadness, his gratitude, when all of it was muted, he experienced happiness. Fulfillment. There was some amount of simple, easy gratitude in the way he lived. The fact that the sun shone on him and didn't burn him. That he was regrowing his body.

Already, from what was really just organ pulp, he was regenerating. His <Worldsense> barely reached the edge of the crater he lay in, and he didn't care to look further. Frankly, the world could go fuck itself right then. Mercury laughed mentally, feeling a little bit like he'd gone insane.

For a while, there, he'd experienced the worst pain of his life. The way his mind had been damaged, the way the sun flayed his bones, it was agony. And now it was gone. Sure, he was laying in a soup of himself, but whatever! Who cared?!

His ribcage sprouted forth from a puddle of blood. The Storm's Raiment was already regeneration, gentle clouds wrapping around his exposed nerves. Muscles threaded from nothing, little strands of thought consolidated into blood vessels and cartilage and organ tissues.

Bit by bit, like a macabre flower from a garden of blood, Mercury's body grew upwards. Not in his humanoid form either, but as a mopaaw, through and through. It was the most natural and easy form to assume these days. Sure, he could twist and assimilate his own flesh until he took a human shape, but he just... didn't care to, this time around. If anyone judged him, then they could judge him.

Smiling faintly, Mercury waited. It took a long, long while for him to regenerate. Hours ticked by, because his Skills had been worn down before. But he lived. He felt pain, but the agony was dull and pitiful. He felt hollowed out, like someone had taken his heart from his chest with fingers of ice.

But more importantly than that, he felt free. He had won, somehow, temporarily. The problem was solved, albeit not *resolved*. There'd be trouble again. And when there was trouble, he'd face it head-on.

Slowly, Mercury breathed in. When his lungs regrew, he got to taste air again, rather than ash, for the first time in forever. It smelled of dust and blood and dirt, but compared to the constant scent of burnt meat and charcoal, he preferred this.

He opened his eyes, too. And that was so very fun. He saw colours, beautiful, scintillating colours. So long had his flesh been boiled away, so long had he been leaning on his metaphysical senses, there was something beautiful to appreciate about colours. The person in front of him was somewhat special, too, he thought.

An androgynous sort of figure, wearing robes so dark grey it was almost black, with a crimson undershirt. Long, dark hair spilled down their back, reaching to their knees. Their eyes burned with purple light, staring down at Mercury.

He laughed. His mouth regrew, and he found it hilarious. He pushed himself up on shaky legs. Terribly shaky legs. He could barely stand, but did it anyway. A bloodstained smile coated his lips. "I can't stand it when people look down at me," he said, then laughed some more.

The stranger did not crack even a smile. Their icy features remained perfectly placid. Their right hand darted into the air, and purple flames wreathed a long, elegant blade. It was straight, and a tassel with a piece of jade hung from its hilt. Mercury admired the steel it was crafted from for a moment.

Smiling at the stranger, he regarded their aura. It was a blazing torrent, a purple wildfire that reached across the entire crater, spilling out far beyond its edges. It spilled across the rocky canyons like water poured from the sky. It was an aura suitable for someone who would crush others underfoot.

"You know who I am," the stranger said, their voice calm and melodic.

"No fucking clue, bud. Enlighten me."

"You have joined my cult."

Mercury tilted his head. "You're the vaunted cult leader, then?"

“For the crime of sabotaging my peak masters, for bringing calm to the raging infernal flames, for being a worthless dreg in a worthless world, you must burn,” they said.

It was a speech delivered with all the passion of an executioner, the verdict already passed. Mercury laughed at the idiot in front of him. “God, fuck, you cultivators really have a flair for drama,” he said, taking a shaky step forward. “Stay down, kid. I’ll fuck you up-”

His legs gave out. Mercury fell down in the crater, the Dream of Starvation being the only thing that kept his fur clean from his own blood, drinking up the puddle he had lain in. The cult leader simply stared at him with pity, as if something so shameful, weak and disgusting wasn’t even worth anger.

“You broke yourself. You burnt out your meridians. You will never cultivate again.”

Smiling, Mercury shrugged. “I’ll be right as rain in a minute.”

“You die, here, now.” Those were the last words the cult leader deigned to say, before cutting Mercury’s head off.

His blade, enveloped by infernal fire, sliced neatly through the weakened mopaaw’s neck, effortlessly parting bone and sinew. Mercury saw the world tilt. Then, he impacted the floor, spilling more blood, more of his own body strewn across the crater. It was really quite frustrating. He’d just gone through the effort growing that body.

Filled with annoyance, the hollowness in his heart that the pain left behind slowly fading, Mercury tried to assimilate some air - pointlessly. The Skill plainly refused to work, leaving him stranded as a decapitated head. Mercury frowned. He couldn’t even talk like this.

So, instead, he used <Distant Transmission>, packing up some of his thoughts and throwing them at the cult leader. It really was just a bundle of emotion more than anything else. They landed on the androgynous figure’s head, impacting it like a faint punch. The cult leader even moved their head to the side.

They stopped walking away, the sword’s tip dragging along the ground. In one slow, fluid motion. When they stared at Mercury again, there was a wolf between the two of them. They tilted their head. “How curious. You live, headlessly? Are you a demon beast? Did you reincarnate? Or summon this fellow creature?”

Juno growled at the tall figure. “Do not take another step.”

Mercury stared. For the first time, his annoyance was replaced with fear. The cult leader slowly circled the outline of the crater, licking their lips. Juno stood protectively in front of Mercury. He sent his thoughts to her, the wish for her to just hide, but she didn't even react. She simply continued to stand between him and that absolute monster.

"Then answer me," the cultist said, a faint smile now on their lips, the sword raised and its tip lazily pointing at Juno. "Are you the same creature?"

"No."

"An underling then?"

"A friend," she answered honestly. "A very dear friend to whom I owe much."

The cult leader tilted their head, tapping its side with the flat of their blade. "Owe? Do beasts keep debts? Are you truly demons?"

Juno refused to reply, simply snarling at them. The cult leader stepped forward again, keeping the wolf at swordpoint. A long minute passed as the two did their delicate dance. Then, the cult leader slashed.

Instantly, the wolf retreated into Mercury's shadow. She sank away as though she had never been there, the flames washing over the place where she had stood and scorching Mercury's skin. He was, at the end, relieved she'd run.

The cult leader stared at the tendril of blood that reached from Mercury's head to his body. They tilted their head. "Was the wolf buying you time to heal? Are you truly unkillable?"

Mercury didn't bother to reply. At this point, he'd just wait it out. There was only so much the cult leader could do to him, and Mercury was so very tired of fighting. In fact, he felt rather sleepy, for the first time in a long while.

"Hey... hey, are you dying?" the cult leader asked, poking him with the butt of the sword. Mercury didn't care though, he closed his eyes. "No. No way. Hey, are you going to sleep?! Hey! I'm going to kill you! I'll kill you, you know!!"

And that was the day that MuChen, leader of the Cult of Infernal Flames, terror of the righteous sect, sole prodigy of the demonfire style, was left standing there, trying to kill someone who had absolutely no interest in fighting.

Juno simply shook her head in the shadows. She had not accompanied Mercury to the heavens, and just now found him again, and yet, he was already up to more shenanigans. Ah, well. He needed his rest, so she would be vigilant, just in case his body took too much damage.

After all, while the cult leader couldn't kill him, they did pick up his body with a disgusted expression, then blast away into the sky.

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Zyl arrived at the crater only an hour or so later. He had searched much of the canyon in search of Mercury, and now, he had found his first sign of his existence. The dragon landed next to the crater, quickly stumbling down the slopes, and kneeling in the small bits of blood that remained.

His snout grew from his face, sniffing the dried blood, tracing its scent, and his eyes dropped all their grief. Instead, Zyl suddenly felt rage.

The dragon was no good at scouting. His Skills leaned towards destruction and art. He hadn't known how to find Mercury, and it had taken him a long time, even with their connection, since it was so faint these days, and Mercury was not using it to call for him. But now, he knew something.

He smelled that someone had appeared here. Someone had spilled more of his boyfriend's blood. Someone had taken that idiotic mopaaw, that absolute moron who ate the sun then spat it back out, that beloved idiot of his.

And that someone had *taken him away*.

Zyl smelled the trail of scent, and his back cracked as his wings sprouted from it.

Zyl was no good at scouting. He was good at breaking things, threatening things, and burning things. But he did have a nose, and he could follow a scent-trail as clear as this.

And whoever had taken his lover was going to have hell to pay.