

Chapter 304: Photosynthesis

Flames rained around Mercury.

A page had passed since he joined the Skyflame Monks for their training, and he had learnt a dozen techniques. He'd learnt and grown, as he always did.

There was something beautiful Mercury had learnt while with the monks, too. Well, perhaps learnt was the wrong word. It was more of a thought properly crystallizing. It was the validity of effort.

People here looked at Mercury with envy, often. He was touted as a prodigy. People looked at him and saw how effortlessly he learnt the techniques. How everything came to him quickly, looking as if it was easy.

And, to some degree, it did. The world wasn't quite fair. It was undeniable that Mercury had some amount of talent, some amount of overlap with his previous skillset. As if he had learnt oil painting and was now working with watercolour.

But the thing he realized was that he was putting in effort. And that no effort he'd put in was wasted.

The thought occurred to him when he stood amidst a rain of fire. When flecks of red and orange fell down around him, touching on the barren sand of the training yard and hissing faintly at the contact. It was the comparison of it all that drove it home.

He wasn't good at this because he was a natural talent. He was good because he had a comparable experience. Every single thing he ever spent time and focus and attention on was something he added into the drawer of his gathered experience. Every memory he made, silly as any skill may be, was a resource.

Being good at dreamweaving helped him work with textiles. Fire magic and cultivation was remarkably similar. Some skill overlapped between woodworking and blacksmithing and all the other tiny bits of craft he'd tried his paws at.

It was a comforting thought. That effort didn't necessarily need to immediately pay off. Mercury didn't expect his ventures into woodworking, the handful of experiences he

gathered with it, to someday save the world. He was doing it for fun at the end of the day. But it was still an experience he made.

Those experiences shaped him as a person. So, when he mastered the Firestorm Arte, he found the overlap with <Rainfall> to be staggering. His qi weaved through his internal passageways and left his body to create the effect, and instantly, he saw the flaws.

He was so familiar with rain and storms that reshaping the technique was second nature. It fell under <Rainfall>'s domain almost instantly, the fire listening to his whims, dancing on the wind. It was the most shocking alteration elder Yue had seen him perform.

Sure, a compressed punch was impressive. And maybe he mastered a few techniques and steps quickly. He could perform the Firestep, the Wheels of Immolation, the Flamelance, and so on and so forth. Yet, in this case, he was not performing a technique.

From the ground up, he reshaped it. A cumulation of effort, rather than a stroke of genius. He was simply more attuned to rain and storms than the creator of this technique had been, and he elevated it. From the Artful-Grade to the Grand one. In a single cast of the ability.

Its very nature was elevated as he changed the pathways, like a conductor directing an orchestra. Fire danced with wind, the flames accelerating, growing, fusing and splitting. Instead of a rain of cinders, it turned into a *firestorm*. The flames burned through the ground, the very sand under his feet turning to glass as they moved through it like water draining down.

Mercury smiled, his face alight with oranges and yellows, his veil standing unharmed amidst the flames. A dozen envious gazes caught on him, children who saw him master things that took them pages within hours.

By now, most of them no longer considered Mercury a peer. The veiled stranger was more in line with their elders. More than half the youths around him gave him looks of wonder rather than envy.

... Luckily, even the most envious of them would no longer attract the skinstealers, since Mercury had rather *permanently* solved that problem. He snickered a little at the thought, letting the flames die out beside him.

When the wall of fire disappeared and sank below the ground, Mercury was left facing an almost drooling elder Yue. Instantly, she dashed forward, attempting to snatch his hand, which he quickly withdrew.

“Teach me,” she said, anyway, eyes glimmering with barely contained excitement.

“Excuse me?”

“Teach me!” Instead of elaborating, she just repeated the demand, smiling happily.

Mercury blinked once. Right. The old woman was definitely a bit of a pyromaniac then, wasn't she? For sure. She had that look to her. The kind that said 'I-love-blowing-up-castles'. Mercury knew, because Marcel had that look as well - the receptionist was more tired about it, of course, but Mercury thought that the city council could consider themselves lucky that Marcel didn't know many offensive spells.

Discarding his rather... distracted thoughts, Mercury took a deep breath, then exhaled slowly. He placed a smile on his lips. “Sure, yeah,” he said. These people had taught him, after all, so he wouldn't hoard his secrets. In a quick flourish, he conjured up an image of the channels he used from solidified mana.

[<Crystallization> has levelled up! <Crystallization lv. 2 -> 3>]

Manifesting solid mana like this also made it work in the same way that actually moving through the positions did, which was fun. Essentially, by showing off the technique, Mercury created a small atmospheric qi converter. Any qi in the air that just so happened to move through the pattern got caught up in it, creating little flares of fire around it.

That did make it harder to observe, of course, but it also looked gorgeous, so he didn't complain when his little statue of channels and movements created sparks. Elder Yue studied the creation carefully, then did her first step. “Like this?” she asked.

The kids in the courtyard stared at her. Seeing an outsider master their techniques was outrageous, of course, but seeing one of their elders attempt to improve one of them? Now that was a sight worth seeing. To a few of them, it might even be a source of future enlightenment!

Yue got a lot of stares as she moved, even as Mercury shook his head. “Your knees are too bent. And your ankle is too strained, the qi isn't flowing properly.”

Nodding, the woman adjusted, and when Mercury gave his wave of approval, she took a second step. These partial executions created minor flares of the technique, little fireflies dancing through the air as motes of heat coalesced from partial movements. Mercury smiled at the light show, then shook his head faintly.

“Too hurried. The motion needs to be smoother here, and you need to push your qi to cycle faster. Use its momentum.”

“Momentum?” elder Yue asked, a little confused. But she still tried her best, resetting to the previous position, then repeating the motion. It was a little better but still pitiful. He shook his head.

With a quick step, Mercury demonstrated. His qi surged into motion, twisting. He let its own momentum carry it forwards, only minimally pushing, and instead focusing most of his energy on redirecting it to manage the tight control the forms demanded. It was a way to make his manipulation more delicate.

The elder studied him with her brows furrowed, giving a look of concentration as her eyes pierced his skin, peering into the qi within. Then, slowly, she nodded. “I see,” she said. When Mercury gave a wave, she took position again, repeating the steps.

By now, all the students were enthralled. Yue Mei, elder turned student, took the first three steps of the forms, the air around her igniting with fire. Wind caught the flames, pushing them-

Then she stopped, and paused for the next form. The flames drifted harmlessly to the ground, as the elder quickly channelled her qi away to avoid injuring herself. Mastering a new technique was treacherous, and Grand techniques were in no way easy on their user.

Despite that, when Mercury gave her a new piece of advice, her eyes lit up, and she completed another step. One by one, bit by bit. Throughout the entire thing, she had a smile on her face.

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[<Novice Woodworking> has levelled up! <Novice Woodworking lv. 4 -> 7>]

Mercury dragged a plane across the lumber he'd made. Trees near the monastery were thin, scraggly things, with deep roots. They were absolutely horrid to try and get anything resembling building lumber from, and Mercury had to really up his skills to even make them workable.

Luckily, of course, he could supplement the lacking material with his magic. If he politely requested the trees to straighten out, and gave them an injection of stamina and mana to facilitate as much, they'd gladly do it for him.

Which Mercury found deeply regretful. Telling even a plant to be straight? What a strange thing for him to do.

He snickered at the thought, then checked the board he was working on. Satisfied with it, he placed it aside. He'd been doing a good bit of woodwork recently. After all, even cultivators still need sleep. So, during the nights, Mercury was largely unbothered.

Of course, some of the elders did stay up through the nights for several days at a time, so it was never *truly* just him, but most of those old monsters really didn't feel like engaging with him a whole lot. So, they left him alone so long as he didn't bother them either. Which he didn't.

Mercury just spent his night making chairs and such. A few chests, bedframes, and so on. It was fun to see what he could make. Usually, he'd have gone for houses, but the monastery had enough of those. They'd shaped the stone of the canyon with fire and force, building structures deep into its walls, and jutting out of them.

So, instead of making more structures, he focused on filling the ones that were already there. The place in general was low on furnishings, and many of those were made from stone, with little fabric or wood in sight. It made sense. That was their most abundant building material, after all, though they did have a little bit of shearable cattle to make some softer stuff with.

Still. These monks really hated chairs, it felt like. I mean, seriously. They had like one chair for every 5 buildings, maybe. A travesty to his seating-loving butt. So, he vowed to change this injustice.

And he enjoyed it. The steady scraping of tools against wood - tools he had forged himself, too. Sometimes, there would be something he didn't yet have. Some specialized chisel, or something he needed to spin. If Mercury wanted to use a router, for example, he'd just spin up his mana, or use <Magic> and <Magical Metallurgy> to create bizarre, temporary runic creations.

The improvisation of it all suited him. Making do with what he could find and make himself. Slowly building his tool chest out, with periodic excursions into little pandora. He did look extremely silly crawling into Logston in his human form. It was not meant for people of his size from the outside, but with a little inelegant squeezing - and some help from <Itinerant> - he always made it to that extradimensional space.

It was quiet in there.

Just like back in the forest, his log had become his only little respite from the world. It was the only place where his skin didn't burn off, after all. It had his Blanket of Dreams, even if he didn't use it much anymore, these days. His smithy, bits and pieces of projects he'd made...

In fact, it was getting almost cramped inside there. He needed to petition the system for another space-expansion upgrade, soon. Or figure out how to make them himself. Surely it couldn't be that hard?

Dimensional magic was something Mercury wanted to try his hands at, to be sure. Time magic, too. That one had always been his favourite to read about, actually. He was quite well versed with ice and fire and metal and shadow and so forth, but he really did want to learn more despite that.

After all, he was a curious cat.

He snickered at the thought, then moved on to sit at the table he'd made himself. It was a little crude, but it did the job. He made his own nails, too, and even screws. Which he luckily didn't have to file into spirals by hand, and instead shaped magically.

Was it cheap? Yes, he was. Mercury was a total cheater, using unfair advantages over mundane smiths. But when Yasashiku could build whole houses by smacking the ground with his hammer once, then surely it was fine for Mercury to use a little bit of magic.

Worst case, he could always shape his rijin into the shape, then use rezil to vibrate it with the resonance, and wrap it around a blank-

He was getting side tracked. Smiling faintly, Mercury shook his head, and got back to his word. Shaving by shaving, he prepped another chair for someone to sit on someday. And the night slowly passed.

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Mercury stood under the brutal rays of the sun again.

Despite everything he'd done, he was still being burnt. Even as he mastered fire-aspected techniques by the handful, he was being scorched. With every minute, the light crept a little deeper into his skin. Past his muscles and down to his bones.

After two pages spent at the monastery, he was back from skin-burning to bone-scorching light. When he looked up, it was almost funny. The sun seemed to consume the entire sky, its light shining so bright he could not even look up without ruining his eyes.

It was a little annoying, really. Luckily, Mercury healed fast, and adapted. But he really had to wonder how long this spiel would continue. The damage ramping up, him building a new resistance, the damage ramping up again...

Wasn't that just tiresome? A bit of a chore? He sighed softly to himself, then took the next step the technique demanded. Qi roared through his channels, and he messed up a route. For a moment, he almost took catastrophic internal damage. Then, he triggered <Unravel>, and the energy fell apart into nothing.

Wasteful, but fine. He had been distracted during practice. His foundations were vastly improved to when he started, that much was true. He had a far better understanding of qi as a substance. His <Internal Energy> had even reached level 4, and <Origin Qi> went up to level 2.

But it was starting to feel a little empty to him. He enjoyed it, still, but the step to Golden Core wasn't yet told to him. He found that a little annoying, but he also understood. Ascending to the Gilded-Realm required taking a piece of heaven, after all. Solidifying one's existence.

The ascent to Golden Core was a bit different from that. Rather than grabbing something and absorbing it, it was about creating something. Mercury had, in a way, done that for Gilded already. Rather than absorbing something from the outside, he had solidified himself.

Still, it would be too thin to let him reach the next realm. Golden Core was about understanding the self. About realizing something fundamental, crystallizing that into a desire, and then using that to fuel the ascension. It was a decision-making process. The first realm that required one to find a piece of the path they wanted to tread.

Mercury sighed softly. He danced through the last handful steps, executing the technique perfectly, but the fire still felt brittle in his veins. It wasn't defining him.

Cultivation was like that. You had to pursue the path that defined you, and Mercury... he loved fire, yes. But it had never been his specialty. He'd be hard pressed to say he had a specialty, really. He picked up all sorts of things quickly.

If anything, his best attribute was his mind, and the esoteric techniques he knew. Sorcery, as the people here called it. Cultivation was magic to him, too, of course, just as much as everything else he did. But to them? Cultivation was normal in the martial world. His magic wasn't.

The names were just for the unfamiliar and the understood. Really, the gap between the two was rather small. And yet, it provided a bit of a canyon that was hard to overcome. What did Mercury want out of this next realm? What did he still have a great desire for?

Was it just to avoid pain? Because that was a fine desire, really. Not being burnt alive. But that was something defining him from the outside, wasn't it? He was being burnt, he didn't burn himself.

Maybe the gap laid there, instead. Sorcery, cultivation, none of those words mattered at all. What did matter was what he wanted, and Mercury, like so many times, found himself asking what that was.

He sat down on the training yard. The sand and gravel was coarse underneath him, a handful rocks poking his butt. He was so physically tough that he barely felt them, though, more of a knowledge they were there than a source of discomfort.

Slowly, Mercury breathed in. He let his mind settle gently, laid his hands in his lap, palms up. He thought for a long, slow moment on what he wanted. If he was honest, he was mostly content. But that wasn't quite true, either.

Happiness wasn't a state one reached. Mercury had a lot, and he was grateful for it every day, but if he admitted to his greediest sides... he wanted more. Of course he wanted more. More magic, more love, more friends, more growth, more things he was good at.

It was why he learnt new things over and over. Why he picked up skill after Skill, just to solve another problem. Mercury enjoyed learning, and he enjoyed the results of it. He liked solving problems, helping people, healing people, mending things. There was gratification to be found in that.

Did he like making the world a better place because of himself, though, or because of how it made other people see him? Did the distinction matter at all?

He breathed in and out. Slow, deep breaths that blew up tiny dust storms around his legs. It was a little disquieting to think about, but he did consider it. What kind of person he was, what kind of person he wanted to *be like*.

If he could, Mercury would be more selfless. Not do anything for the thanks or the fame. But he did like getting thanked. He enjoyed feeling like he'd done things. It was a little selfish part of him, but that was okay. After all, he did still help rude people. And was nice to them - for the most part.

A soft sigh escaped his lips, and he shook his head, taking a moment to let his thoughts settle again.

Meditating was hard. He was quite good at it for mental exercises, but introspection? Less so. Still, Mercury gave it his best shot.

Slowly but surely, he dragged out bits of what he wanted. The very idea of who he wanted to be. He linked it to his curiosity, to his faint desire for appreciation, even by strangers, to the way he couldn't walk away from a problem. It wasn't a quick process at all, either.

After an hour or three, he paused. It was like making a window by welding together bits of broken glass. He was trying to peer deeper, to see himself in a new facet, and he had to find the perspective for that first. And that took time.

When his legs felt stiff from sitting, Mercury rose to his feet. His mind was still full of thoughts, his qi felt like it had settled in his meridians and was now like sand being shaken up. He did feel a little different, though. Not necessarily lighter or heavier, but there sat a sort of dull recognition in the back of his head.

A budding sense of change. It was probably growth, but sometimes that process sucked a little. Even now, when he prodded the thought-construct it vibrated and shook and almost broke. He traced a mental thumb along its edge and some of the harsher thoughts he could almost cut himself on.

Faintly, a trickle of blood ran from his nose, and Mercury quickly wiped it away with a blink. Okay, so, not just *almost*, then.

Still, he rose to his feet. It would take time. He was patient.

With the sun scorching his bones, Mercury trained, worked, and lived. He even slept some nights, woke up in the morning, ate food, practiced and meditated. Day by day, sunup to sundown.

He breathed, he lived, he thrived.

Even in adversity, slowly but surely, he grew.

A burning sun was still just forcing him into photosynthesis.