

Chapter 296: Challenging the Heavens

“Getting gilded is the first proper step into elevating yourself. When your body was rusted, you cleaned it. Then you reforged it. You have achieved the bare minimum to call yourself valuable,” Kang explained. “But a tool is just a tool. If you want to be *exceptional*, then you need to be more than simple metal.”

Mercury tilted his head. That all sounded like a nice allegory. He really was curious who had ‘invented’ cultivation, so to speak, since it was all very blacksmithing-adjacent. Which he was decently practiced in.

If he saw it that way, then until now, he’d been reclaiming scrap metal from previous things. Now it was time to turn that scrap into something more than the basics. He’d made a thing, a usable version of himself. There was certainly things to improve, though.

Even now, the energy flowing through his body felt thin compared to what he could handle. His dantian stored his origin qi, sure, but it wasn’t really that solid. He did want more. More control, more inherent chances to use his techniques, more... everything.

So, he tilted his head. “And how do I go about doing that?” he asked.

Kang smiled gently. “Well, you need better material, don’t you? Sure, the quality of your techniques matters, and you can do a lot with a little, but in the end, this is an eat or be eaten sort of world. So, eat the world instead.”

“That makes no sense,” Mercury said with a frown.

At that, the cultivator laughed. It was a long, hearty, throaty noise. Charming, but on the verge of being just a little unhinged. “Pahahaha! Yes, quite. It makes no sense at all.” Kang grinned, spreading his arms wide. “But what does, Mercury? What in this world makes sense? Your sorcery? The fact that Gun-Byeong beat the rust out of you, that Pali made you chew rocks, that peak master Su cut off your limbs so you could learn? Come now.”

There was a glint in his eyes then. A manic sort of affection that all cultivators probably shared, Mercury thought. “The truth is that we’re all insane. We all are desperate creatures, Mercury. To cultivate is to want. It’s to desire nothing but growth. The want to kill someone, to exceed someone, to be free from someone, to do something, to tear the heavens down from

the sky and rise above. To live forever. It's desire, all of it. And desire..." he rolled the word on his tongue and gave a charming, restrained smile, squinting his eyes.

"Desire is everything in this world, my student."

Of course, Mercury knew that much already. He had, somewhat, seen into the bowels of the system and perceived what it did. He had <Answer> and <Seeker of Secrets> aka Appy on his side. If there were other people who knew more about the system on Chronagen, he would wager it wasn't the majority of people.

After all, he had pushed himself a lot to see things that most people wouldn't see, and he'd gotten lucky to survive more than once. So, comparing perception abilities specifically, Mercury was rather sure he was in the upper echelon of this world.

And he still wanted more. He was greedy, he knew that. In a lot of ways, he was happy with where he was, but at his very heart, there was a rather simple desire: Curiosity. Mercury loved magic, all facets of it. Even the parts that hurt, in part because he could wash that hurt away and focus on the good.

He loved spells, he loved cultivating, he loved finding new angles to see things from, figuring out new techniques and how to forge his path forwards. He wanted to enter the Gilded-Realm. He wanted to improve himself further, to use more qi more easily, to cast more magic.

Because he was a curious cat, wasn't he? So, he faintly smiled. "Is eating a piece of the heavens a metaphor, then?"

"Not in the slightest," Kang said with a smile. "How high do you think the sky goes, Mercury?"

The mopaaw tilted his head at that. "Excuse me?"

"I mean what I said. How high do you think the sky goes?" he asked again.

That was an odd question. Mercury had kind of assumed Chronagen was a planet. Y'know, placed in a solar system, orbiting a sun, those kinds of things. "I didn't think there's a limit? Like, I thought the air would just thin and then eventually go to almost nothing."

Kang tilted his head. "That's surprisingly accurate," the cultivator nodded. "But it's imperfect. See, there is a drop in air pressure as you go higher, but it doesn't just thin infinitely."

Eventually, it grows almost perfectly to zero. Then, powers stop failing. That's where the *heavens* begin."

Mercury blinked in confusion. What was that meant to mean? Was there something special about space in this world?

Seeing his curiosity, Kang nodded, his curls bouncing and framing his face. "Yes, it's odd, isn't it? To think that we'd be so strangely limited. That there's a sky in the sky, a boundary where things stop working. Because we're mortal." His smile fell off his face at the words. "Because we're too little. The boundary is soft. But it is there. It's a thick shell, coating this world and protecting it."

Did the system really deactivate powers? Mercury wondered about that - it generally seemed rather insistent on letting people keep their skills, except for rather specific circumstances, like Mercury self-restricting.

No, in his experience, when Skills stopped working it was usually because someone else interfered with them. He could make magic fizzle into nothing with his <Rainfall>. Was that it, then? Was this 'heaven' up there really just some kind of superpowered, overlapping domain?

He felt <Answer> twitch, but restrained it. He was salivating at the thought of finding out for himself. Which was odd, but then again, he could eat knowledge now, so it made sense in a roundabout way. But he quickly shelved that thought, focusing on the idea of eating the sky again.

"So, I have to eat part of this boundary?" Mercury asked.

Kang shook his head gently. "Sort of, but not quite. Perhaps you could. Pali did, or so I'm told - I did not witness her ascension myself. For most cultivators, we simply blaspheme and seek power until the heavens move to strike us down with tribulation lightning."

Tribulation lightning. How curious. Mercury wondered about that. His current state was strong, tougher than he'd ever been, but he didn't feel too optimistic at the chances of his body surviving tribulation lightning. It sounded a little odd to him, even the words themselves sent a slight ringing into his ears, like distantly rolling thunder.

"And then?" he asked.

“When we’re stuck down, we rise up again. We drink in the anger of the heavens and uplift ourselves with our resistance. What desire is more pure than that to survive?” he asked with a smile. “We remake ourselves in the most barbaric way, we steal the lightning and weave it into our veins. Because to cultivate is to challenge the heavens.”

Mercury nodded once. He thought that was interesting. In fact, he was beginning to think that there was something at the core of cultivation that was rather important to him. What an interesting journey he’d undertaken.

“So, why show me the godvein, then?” Mercury asked.

Kang pointed its way, at the prismacolour light that crawled across the cave floor. The way reality warped and twisted. “Because it’s a piece of heaven, Mercury. Or it projects one. That room? It’s what heaven feels like. I show it to you so you know what it’s like to burn in heaven’s ire.”

Yet another reason to have been shown the godvein. It was a test, a demonstration, and a lesson all at once. Mercury liked that. It was a very... hands-on approach to teaching. The moment he had the thought, Kang leapt for his throat in an attempt to slit it, only for Mercury to grab his wrist and push it down into the prismacolour slurry until Kang’s skin started to melt.

“Ow, ow, ow!” the peak master complained. “Alright, alright! Attempt aborted!”

Mercury let go of Kang’s wrist, and the man shook it out, his skin still hissing. Mercury tilted his head. “Then how do I attract the ire of the heavens? I don’t understand that part.”

“Already wanting to attract your set of lightning, my student?” Kang asked with a wry smile. “Your cultivation realm has barely stabilized yet. Consolidation is important.”

“You don’t even believe that,” Mercury chided.

Kang grinned. “I don’t at all. But it’s what the righteous sects would tell you. Challenging the heavens is easy, really. You just ask the system.”

Tilting his head, Mercury eyed the cultivator curiously. “Really, is it that simple?” he asked.

“Yes,” Kang answered.

[Not quite,] Appy replied.

That was the true recipient of his query, after all. His stalwart companion. Mercury quickly held a mental conversation with her.

‘How does the system do tribulation lightning, then?’

[Tribulation lightning may originate from the Will of the World, or similar entities. Calling methods generally involve petitioning them - either via a polite request or via drawing their anger.]

Mercury paused. Thought for a moment. ‘Am I currently under the effects of a tribulation?’ he asked.

[Affirmative.]

He thought as much. ‘Can I use it to ascend to the Gilded-Realm?’

[Technically. But it is inadvisable.]

Interesting. The answers were becoming a little short, but Mercury thought he understood the way forward they were painting. There were probably some restrictions in the way, so he phrased his next question carefully. ‘Is it a requirement to use a tribulation to get to the Gilded-Realm?’

[It is not.]

Turning to Kang, Mercury smiled. “I don’t think I’ll use tribulation lightning,” he said.

At that, the peak master was confused. For a moment, his face shifted into genuine surprise. “Huh? What do you mean you won’t? Has Pali taught you how to eat heaven?”

“Yes, I probably could. But I won’t,” Mercury said with a smile. “I think I know what I want to do. But it’ll take some time to figure out. You’re welcome to watch.”

Kang tilted his head. The surprise shifted to curiosity. “You have a plan?”

“Sure do.”

His head tilted the other way, almost like a cat. “Are you going to tell me about it?”

Mercury grinned. “Absolutely not.”

That made a bit of greed flash across the peak master's face. "Ah, dang. I can't help but want to know, now. That's cruel, Mercury."

"It sure is."

"You're my student, too. Students don't hide things from their teachers."

"Teachers don't try to kill their students," Mercury countered with a shrug. Then, he closed his eyes, and Kang's protests fell on deaf ears. This peak master was a little troublesome when his suave shell was cracked, Mercury found. But he was patient. "Can you bring me some of your manuals on reaching the Gilded-Realm?" he asked.

Kang pouted adorably, then nodded. "Fine," he said haughtily. "I shall simply put you in my debt, then watch what this plan of yours is about."

Mercury nodded politely. "Let's do that, then."

- - -

When he returned to Zyl that evening, it was with a few bleeding cuts on him, and a long cut from the corner of his mouth, splitting his cheek open. It was slowly mending.

"What happened to you?" the dragon asked, his brows furrowed.

Mercury shrugged. He opened his mouth, then paused, then grinned. "Oh, you wanna know how I got these *scars*?"

Zyl blinked. "What the heck is that accent?"

The mopaaw blinked, then laughed. "Don't sweat it. A joke from my original world. No, Kang just cut me up a little. He's a bit murderous, you know? But I'll be fine. You should have seen him."

"Is he more hurt than you?" Zyl asked, crossing his arms.

"Hm? No, he's fine for the most part. I was careful," Mercury nodded proudly. At that, the dragon scoffed, then shook his head.

Zyl caught Mercury in a quick hug, squeezing his reckless idiot boyfriend. Then, he pulled himself out a chair, sat down, placed his chin on his hands, and looked at Mercury. "So. This place is rough. The people here are very upfront about what they want from you. They tried to mug me fourteen times."

"Fourteen?" Mercury raised his eyebrows.

"Fourteen," Zyl repeated, deadpan. "I got so tired of it I just started ignoring them and walking forward. Most of these people know how to swing a weapon. They're all fiendishly clever. I was ambushed, exploded, set on fire, had boiling oil poured on my head, and so on."

Mercury blinked. "Sounds... exhausting."

"It was," the dragon lamented. "I really did get impatient with them. The peak itself is nice enough, I suppose. But even the fauna feels like traps. The flowers whispered that they're hungry, Mercury."

Very gently, the mopaaw pulled his boyfriend into a hug. "You hate it here," he said. It wasn't a question.

"I hate it here," Zyl repeated. "I understand what they're trying to teach the kids. That it's a ruthless world out there. That the martial realm is not for the faint of heart. But I don't like it."

Mercury nodded. "I get that," he said. "I do. I think this place has some real problems. And I think I do want to address them. Did you see anyone die?"

"... No," the dragon said, hesitantly.

"That's the bare minimum, I know, but at least, it is still kind of training. We need to change things, yes. Everyone here could do with a little more kindness. But that's a large change. I'll probably be spending tomorrow with Kang again, Zyl. Do you want to try and change things out there?"

It was a simple question, but at the same time an encouraging one. "Change things?" Zyl asked. "How?"

Mercury smiled faintly, showing his fangs. "Same as when you made your own nation. Might makes right in the martial world. If you don't want someone to do something, stop them."

He said it as if it were simple, when to Zyl, it shouldn't be. He was strong, but in a very different way from Mercury. He was worse at regenerating, but far tougher. But all of his attacks were incredibly destructive.

If he wanted to, he could have turned this mountain to slag. He could wear his crown and reshape this place into a simple lake of magma, reducing it to ash, even. But that wouldn't exactly keep anyone safe, now, would it?

"I don't think my strength is suitable for that kind of change," Zyl said with a shrug.

"You're right," Mercury said. Which really wasn't very encouraging. Zyl scoffed softly, but the mopaaw continued. "It's not. You're really good at killing things, right? Breaking things. But then, you're also really tough. Just activate every trap. Step on all the landmines, fall in every hole that's there, make sure everyone sees, and have them band together against you. Make them try to kill you and fail."

Zyl blinked.

"Be the big scary dragon, Zyl," Mercury said with a smile. "Be their tribulation. Show them that they need to work together."

The big, scary dragon blinked, still held tight in Mercury's arms. "Do you really think that'd work?" he asked.

"Dunno!" Mercury said with a snicker. "But it might. And that's a lot better than moping."

At that, Zyl frowned, and raised up a claw to flick Mercury's forehead. It gave a dull, metallic ring on impact, which really wasn't very satisfying, but the dragon relented. "Thanks," he said in the end, squeezing Mercury once, then pulling free from the embrace. A moment passed, and he cleared his throat. "Let's eat?"

"Let's eat," Mercury nodded.

- - -

Mercury stared at the prismacolour thing that was the godvein. It burnt his eyes, it burnt his skin, and the radiation poisoning made his immune system go haywire. His body hated being in its presence.

Slowly, Mercury tilted his head one way, then the other. He ran his fingers across the scriptures he was handed. Scrolls far different from what he received on the peak of Mutilation.

These ones were made of hair-thin, translucent paper with words that swam like ink. They seemed to lie to their readers as much as they revealed, and Mercury had found three traps

in the scroll that could have killed a regular cultivator. One he'd missed and exploded his arm.

Really, though, he didn't feel a grudge. He had been warned they'd try to kill him, and since Mercury was a calm and entirely reasonable person, he forgave them. Instead, he stared at the decaying, poisonous body part of a god, letting its horrid light warp his flesh. Like a calm, reasonable person.

Sighing softly, he rose from the ground, patted the dust from his robes - there was, of course, no dust, since the poisonous radiation eliminated it all - and then walked outside. His shadow, or, well, Juno, batted aside a landmine for him, letting it release a fiery wave of napalm on the cave wall.

"They really don't get tired of this, do they?" the wolf asked, her voice faintly distorted by the darkness.

Mercury smiled and shook his head. "They really don't."

He walked through the tunnels with slow steps, his hands clasped behind his back. It was quiet, for the most part. There was crashing, cascading noise, when some of the disciples tried to kill him, but they all failed.

Most of them were barely in the Rusted-Realm. Anyone who'd reforged themselves would feel his <Origin Qi> and shy away. No, these people were no threat to him.

Instead, when he got closer to the surface, his skin started to ache. He even wore his hat, its veil cascading down his face in many layers of cloth. There were still tons of rock separating him from the sun, too. And yet, Mercury felt himself burn a little.

Despite that, he walked up. Tunnel after tunnel, led by his senses. Occasionally, Juno would pop out and walk alongside him, just for the change of scenery, her grey-blue fur shimmering with a metallic gleam. She seemed to like this place, really, Mercury saw. The faint way her aura curled when he watched her disarm another trap.

Yeah, she'd do well in this den of assassins if he let her. He smiled faintly, then winced. The sunlight wasn't even directly touching him yet, but he still felt its smoldering heat. What a pain, what a pain.

Mercury walked some more, then some more, and eventually, he made it outside. By then, there was a faint haze of smoke around him, as well as the smell of carbon, as his skin

turned to ash in the incinerating heat that touched no one else. Mercury slowly dove deeper into the <Babbling Brook>, using it to cleanse his mind of pain.

This was just his nerves. The light touched his mind, but found itself unable to find purchase, yet. Maybe someday soon it could burn that, too, but not yet. And thus, Mercury walked on the surface world once more.

Kang asked him to stay beneath, but that was before Mercury had learned about the heaven. The ceiling of the world. And now, he wanted to see it himself. Taking a deep breath, Mercury took another step.

His foot landed in mid-air. It stopped on a solid platform of will, his own mind uplifting him. His second sole left the earth, and the sun screamed at him in defiance. His flesh charred deeply, muscles turning to carbon in moments. Swiftly, that damage was discarded, then repaired.

Juno hid in his shadow, a stark outline that told the truth of the sun's hatred for him. The light seemed to curve in on Mercury, turning his surroundings faintly darker, his shadow wider, more vast. He felt like he was an ant, and some giant kid in the sky was going really ham with a magnifying glass.

Snickering at his own analogy, Mercury took another step into the sky, then another.

With each one he took the weight of the sun on him grew a little heavier. That radiant star in the sky which seemed to have recently developed a hatred for everything he stood for. But why? What had he done that bothered it?

He wanted to know. So he took another step. His bones began to fry. He had hidden from the sun for so long. The Skyflame Monks probably had an answer for him, that was true. He could grow himself to the Gilded Realm first. Get a tougher body, and resist the radiation. That was true, too.

Maybe, if he was brave, he could have eaten the godvein. That probably could have made him resist this, too. But he didn't want to.

No, this was a visit out of curiosity. He'd still visit the monks, when he was ready. And then, he'd learn from them, too. But for now, he just wanted to see what was up there. What the edge of the world looked like. There was a glint in his eyes. And he took another step.

The heat burnt the inside of his lungs. His blood boiled, literally, and his sweat was stained red with crimson fluid. It should have hurt, but he didn't mind terribly. His body was tough, now, and swiftly regenerated.

So, he walked. Up, and up, and up into the sky. Under the baleful light of the sun, that burnt him away. After a few dozen steps, Mercury was forced to call upon his <Rainfall>. The stormclouds blunted the sunlight. For a while, he was fine.

Then he burnt again.

He summoned the Stifled Silence, his silver diadem, and combined it with <Mercury> to shroud himself.

And still, he burnt.

He cloaked himself in <Magic>, asked the wind to turn into a mirror, and yet burnt anyway.

It was kind of amusing, to feel his defenses so utterly overwhelmed. Every step he took, the burning intensified. His skin turned to ash, then his muscles, then his bones. His heart shook off layers of charred flesh with every beat. He looked down and saw his own open ribcage splayed out in front of him.

Mercury brought a skeletal hand to his face and felt bone grind on bone. He would have laughed, but his skeletal frame didn't manage the sound. And still he walked.

He walked until the air got thin, and the sun turned his marrow black.

He walked until he could see the earth curve underneath him, until all sound vanished, and his body was scattered as ash to the wind.

He walked until his legs burnt away underneath him, bones falling apart under their own weight, the height making them splinter and disintegrate in moments. Until he caught himself with his will, and pushed himself up just a step further.

He walked until he saw *heaven*.

Mercury looked up. He saw the edge of the world. He tilted his head and laughed.

It was worth it.

