

Chapter 306: Silver Core

"You're in pain," Zyl said drily.

Mercury nodded. He didn't need to answer. His boyfriend already knew, arm gently wrapped around his waist, head leaning on his shoulder.

"And there's nothing I can do about it, is there?"

With a small shake of his head, Mercury placed a kiss on Zyl's head. The dragon was worrying, but it was pointless in the end. Zyl couldn't save him. Couldn't shoulder his burdens for him - nor would Mercury want him to.

He was a bit of a vain mopaaw, after all. Proud and stuck-up, determined to prove to himself that he could succeed, no matter the odds. And that was what this was about, too. The mastering of fire techniques, building his resistance, letting his body steadily grow stronger against sunlight and heat.

By now, even magical fires did little more than redden his skin. And yet, sunlight bored through him mercilessly. It had grown in intensity again, reaching beyond his bones, into the threads of mana and qi that composed him. He could feel it burning away tiny bits of his magic, of his mind.

<Minedbloom> kept his mind growing, though. With every breath he took, it grew a little more, its speed only accelerating. For now, he was easily keeping up with the decay - more than easily. His mental capacity was outgrowing it many times over.

But so had his regeneration used to, and now his bones were on fire again.

Outlasting was only an option for so long. Mercury had to keep growing, to keep the curse at bay. Right now, it hurt in a way that <Babbling Brook> couldn't entirely take care of. In a way that pulled at his thoughts, and made his mind ache.

Zyl sighed, loudly. The dragon closed his eyes, and leaned more into Mercury. "Seeing you suffer sucks."

It was a discussion they'd had more than once, and it was a discussion they'd have again. "I know."

“And I’ll just have to trust you’ll come out okay, huh?” Zyl asked. He sounded upset, his voice not nearly as calm and collected as usual.

Mercury just nodded. “Yep. I know it sucks.”

“It does.”

The dragon laid his hand on Mercury’s chest, feeling the beating heart and the core of splintered glass that sat beneath his skin. His fingers pressed against Mercury’s charred bones, the mopaaws skin having long since crumbled away underneath his stormcloud-robos.

“And still... it gets easier,” Zyl said with a smile. Mercury’s ribcage thrummed with life, despite everything. It was a little grotesque, Zyl thought, but then again... what wasn’t a bit morbid in this world?

He had gotten an arm ripped off and eaten by a demon he’d now say he was reasonably well acquainted with. He had started drawing to get away from leveling mountains and burning realms. He had incinerated a tree made of hands for this boyfriend of his, a whole wasteland of corpses <Desolated>.

Zyl was strong. He was stronger than so many, which gave him the chance to join Mercury in his adventures at all. If Zyl had been weak, he would have had to stay behind. Now, he simply remained when he was unwelcome - when Mercury decided to tackle things on their own.

“How does it get easier?” the dragon’s idiot boyfriend asked.

It was an easy question. “Because you keep coming back.”

Mercury smiled. He looked up, into the sky, where the sky rested, and his face melted from his skull. “I do indeed.”

He wasn’t sure he would, this time.

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Glass pressed tight in Mercury’s chest. He knew he wouldn’t make it click with meditation and sitting still. That was, of course, something he could do. Something he was good at, even. He’d learnt a lot about meditation from old Uunrahzil, and could quiet his mind rather well.

It was not, however, something that would propel him forward in this endeavour. Golden-Core. The ascension that had eluded him the longest out of anything related to cultivation. It had been pages since he last advanced.

By cultivation standards, that was nothing short of prodigious. Most people needed chapters for the first handful realms; acts, even. It was a time consuming art. And Mercury was running a little short on time.

So, he did what he wanted to do. Selfishly, in the most silly way imaginable, he was experimenting with magic and enchanting.

In a way, it was the culmination of many of his efforts. <Magical Metallurgy>, <Novice Woodworking> and <Magic> came together for it. He <Carved> runes right into the fabric of the world, converting ambient energy into different ones.

He made the wood grow, building houses from living trees, and he shaped their veins into magical enchantments. The things he could make that way were truly artful. Trees bent and reshaped themselves into winding paths, making houses. Their roots deepened and spread, providing nutrition to much larger structures.

The enchantments that flowed through them allowed ambient mana and regular biological processes to come together and reinforce the wood, keeping it alive more easily. It was as if he had taught the plants how to eat mana; not quite though. They still needed soil and water and sunlight. Still, it shouldn't be too much trouble for magical houses.

Humming to himself, Mercury felt the most peace he had in days when he was just finishing up the tenth one. The process had become meditative. Reshape the wood grain, the rings of the tree to make enchantments. Coat it in a layer of <Dreamweave>, arranging the material that made up all of reality into runes itself.

[<Enhance Reality> has levelled up! <Enhance Reality lv. 1 -> 2>]

A Skill that was meant specifically for himself, projected and used externally. That was part of who he was, then, right? About sharing with the world. About changing it.

Every living being had a specific impact on the world they inhabit, Mercury thought. He traced his finger along the grain, and whispered to the tree to grow just a little longer - told it that it was almost there, where it could flower, that he'd make sure to feed it plenty of stamina and vitality once no one was looking.

And the tree listened. It grew, enhanced by all his tiny requests, and the things Mercury was doing in order to help it along. The tree was, in a lot of ways, rather more malleable than he'd expected. It took to the changes well, even the ones that would be unusual to a species such as this.

So, he kept humming to it. Tiny pokes on how it should change, how it might rearrange its circulation to draw out a little more. He'd come up with a beautiful pattern before starting work, then instantly had to scrap it all when the trees encountered the first corner of the house and had to curve.

Instantly, all his gorgeous, wonderful designs fell apart, not ready to adjust for it. And each tree had a unique thickness, as well as interspaced branches... Yeah, he had to adjust the design to be unique to each tree. Sigh. Every house he built, every tree he used, required him to redevelop things from scratch, even if the base principles held.

He designed coiling, looping systems of magic circles that could stack to keep it cold indoors. He designed reinforcement runes, then integrated those into the tree's fibre to make the wood magically stronger.

[<Novice Woodworking> has levelled up! <Novice Woodworking lv. 7 -> 9>]

That alone was, apparently, a sign that he had improved a lot. Promptly, he applied the same principle to his own body, weaving runes into his bones with nothing more than a thought, but it did little against the relentless sun.

Oh well. Instead, he smiled, hummed, and made the tree grow a little more, forming into a roof to keep the rain out, dense sheets of wood folding and rolling into each other at his request. Fibres wove together, sprouted anew, and grew foliage to protect the wood from rot and infestation.

Living leaves grew into the shape of a roof, keeping out the sporadic rains and more common dusty breezes that often pulled through the valley. Mercury installed a small air circulation system to keep the room fresh, and he made sure to enchant the wood in the kitchen with fire resistance enchantments, and some minor self-sterilizing.

In short, he paid attention to the details as he grew the organic houses. He hummed happily, even as he was forced to reinvent the magic from scratch several times over. Even as he experienced setback after setback. In the end, it would be worth it.

Every living thing interacts with the world. Every living thing has to consume, to some degree. Food and water, space and time and air. There was no way to live without impacting someone or something. Mercury was close - being able to think himself into existence - but at some points in life, he'd step on someone's toes.

But, overall, when all was said and done... he wanted to make a positive impact on this world.

[<Truth> has levelled up. <Truth lv. 8 -> 9>]

Maybe it was a fairly simple goal, but Mercury did quite like people in general. The more he interacted with them, he found that most people, human or not, tended to be rather kind. He'd found places to sleep in small communities, people exchanging favors with him, and even when sects sought to drive him out for cutting into their profit margins, people had come to him for help, offering little gifts.

That was something he cherished. The small interactions where he was able to improve things for others. It was why he had taken up crafting at all, why he was building houses or repaired tools for a pittance. There was no need for him to make much of a profit. If he needed money, he could earn it by selling things.

No, rather than seek out that, he just wanted to improve things a little. The standard he had for himself wasn't even high. Solving a small problem when he saw it was enough. Often, he'd found that people weren't quite courageous enough to step up when someone else was in trouble. And he also found himself with the power to do good.

So he did good. It was as simple as that, really. Sometimes it was a little scary to step up, but what was the worst that could happen, really? Someone yells at him? Then he walks away and simply lives his best life elsewhere.

The truth sank into his chest as another glassy splinter. For a moment, it seemed to mess with the delicate balance of the glass sphere that sat there. It shifted, and crunched against itself, the noise of grinding glass hurting Mercury almost as much as the force with which it carved into his bones.

For a painful minute, the thing that was to be his new core moved in his chest, grinding and rearranging itself in the search for a modestly more comfortable arrangement. It didn't end up finding it.

In the end, after a minute, the glass shards seemed to decide that finding equilibrium was impossible, and they might as well just sit there. Poking his internal organs and skeleton. Wonderful, Mercury thought.

He had hit the saturation point. In a way, it was wonderful. He had meditated and thought on himself quite a lot these past few pages. After all, that was what Golden-Core demanded. And he had gathered a lot of little and big truths. He felt comfortable with and aware of who he was.

Not in a magical clarity way, either, just in a fairly normal pleasantness. He had established his goals for his life, and where he would find happiness in the small things every day, rather than chasing it as a state to attain. And he had found gratitude for the things he already had. His friends, his home, and his freedom.

Mercury felt that, even with the wrath of the sun on his back, the pain in his core, and the world being fragile, he could do whatever he wanted. Go where he wanted, see what he wanted, help who he wanted. And that was something he found himself very, very grateful for.

Using that bit of free will, he stepped outside the house he'd just built, grabbed the side, and climbed onto its roof.

It was evening in the valley, the sun just crawling down the horizon. Shadows lazily crawled over the floor, falling over his face, turning his veil from a pale white into a more muted, dull grey. Quiet fell like a hush.

But Mercury's insides weren't quiet.

With his proto-core failing to find equilibrium, he had the task set for him. The advancement to Golden-Core was a fairly fast one, and difficult to delay once it had set in. Cultivators had triggered it during battles, and either got killed in the process or finished it fast enough to win. Objectively, it didn't take very long.

Subjectively, that was a different story.

Mercury sat down on the roof for the long haul. Splinters of glass dug into him, and he set about doing the thing that he was told was hard about ascension. Taking all those little, accumulated truths, and making sure they fit together evenly.

It was half puzzle, and half craft project. A cultivator had to find their creed, their path forward, and that internalization of their ideals required some amount of polishing, reduction and sacrifice. Mercury had a million things he wanted and thought. So many tiny ideas and hobbies and activities and people he wanted to dedicate himself to.

And while he wasn't exactly short on time, there were redundancies in there. Things he might not want to define him, after all. So now, it was about grinding away the jagged edges of the glass. The splinters that dug into him. Making sure he accepted the ones he couldn't do without.

He meditated, and he <Carved>. Ethereal claws dug into the glassy core, shaving away jutting glass fragments that scored lines of pain in his bones. He discarded them as best as he could. Let some of the cruel thoughts go.

If he were to compare it to the <Babbling Brook>, it was a little like letting his thoughts rest on the leaves and float down the river. He had them, he understood that to some degree they were his, but they didn't need to define him. He wasn't defined by his laziness or arrogance, by the way he got angry at being objectified.

Cutting away the jagged edges of guilt, he accepted that he might be a little too quick to anger, and the goal to work on those pain points. That he might slack off sometimes, or be a little distractible. A path forward also included weaknesses to shore up, after all.

One by one, he tackled all of them. As much as it hurt to see, he smoothed away the harsh edges of his own thoughts. He forgave himself for things that needed forgiving, and put things away that were not quite the truth at all. He discarded the thought that he was a coward, for example. That one was simply a lagging insecurity from his past as a human, and didn't really apply anymore.

And, eventually, after what felt like hours of pinprick pain, of working his mental fingers bloody cutting himself on sharp, serrated thoughts, he finally found himself with a smoother sphere. Not smooth, not yet, but smoother.

The pieces of glass fit together in a crude manner, leading into one another. They still created pockets of air, but at the same time, the edges had been sanded down, carved away, now flowing in an almost wave-like pattern. Some of them had changed colour faintly, growing a little more shiny.

Stage two of the process was to combine all those disparate thoughts into a proper path.

In short, he needed to weld them. Mercury was decent at metalworking, but to erase the edge between his own thoughts metaphysically was hard. He did, however, do it. According to old Bai, the trick was in picking a good starting point.

So, Mercury had thought a lot about it and settled on something simple. Wanderlust and curiosity. They were two facets of who he was, ones that he had embraced a long while ago. He'd never quite stay in the same place.

Yes, he considered Stormbraver a home, and sometimes he felt a little bad to leave it, but he could never spend a decade there. He loved seeing the world too much. He loved going places, doing new things, embracing the world wholeheartedly.

And that led into his curiosity. The way that he wanted to see more, learn more, widen his horizon. He loved finding new teachers, absorbing everything they had to show him, and enhancing his skillset. He had learnt to eat rocks, to meditate, to rebuild himself, to face the unwinnable and smile, and how to heal in this journey east.

He loved every second of it.

Even when he saw horrible things, Mercury didn't flinch away. If he saw horrors, he tried to correct them. He would keep doing just that as he looked, and he wanted to see more. Sad things, happy things, amazing things, interesting things. His curiosity was boundless, and he loved it that way.

Embracing it, combining it with his wanderlust was almost easy. The two already cut a smooth seam. So, he welded them together. A coating of silver bonded their edges, and he felt them gently pull on the others. That was the core of his path - curiosity.

From there, the next steps flowed into each other. Always finding the next puzzle piece, the step to make it fit. He heated the glass up, increasing the temperature of his qi and mana by spinning them, creating friction. His internal temperature rose, his own heat quickly picking up what the sun burnt into him.

Charcoal bones lit with fire, making the edges of the glass waver. Mercury simply immolated his skeleton to enhance the progress.

This was, amusingly, a demonic art. Keiko had told him about it. Demonic cultivators would burn their blood to enhance their breakthrough at the cost of immense pain and sacrifice. It was an angry, violent technique.

He smiled as he did it. The pain was washed away by <Babbling Brook>. His skeleton would reappear, even though for most people it might not. He would be fine. So, he burned, and forged, and worked away.

One by one, the thoughts interlaced. The path grew into a complete, spherical whole. The smooth seams turned into small scars of silver on the surface of a sphere. A small hum of happiness escaped Mercury's lips.

The third, and final step, was tuning.

With a gentle mental pressure, Mercury tapped the core he had just created. There was a soft ringing noise as he struck it with the mental equivalent of a tiny hammer, just hard enough to test what sound it might make.

And then, he found the discordant notes. Listening closely, he identified pain points, shifted things where he needed to, heated mismatched parts to smooth them out. He listened for the tiniest of irregularities, where two shards were in discord, then slightly shifted them until they clicked into place.

It was a little like solving a puzzle box by ear. Step by slow step, he mended, fixed, and put in place. He reconciled what he wanted with other things he desired. How could his need for exploration fit with his desire for a home? He wanted a place to come back to, and something to take with him, so that was fine.

Would he have enough time to visit everyone he ever met? Would his connections last? He decided the worthwhile ones would stick around. It would take effort, but he could also take others along on journeys, or visit them often enough.

With each strike of the mental hammer, the tone grew just a bit clearer. The discordant notes disappeared. And, eventually, they were gone. Mercury tapped the core, and its surface rippled. The last thought clicked into place. Now, he simply had one thing left to do. Integration.

A single thought reached for the core. He grasped it, and placed it in his center. Between his heart and his lungs, compressed down into a tiny pinprick. So small it wouldn't interfere with his body's operation. A ghostly organ, half-real.

Then he rotated it, allowing it to unfold. Take hold and blossom within his chest. With a swift spin of beautiful energy, silvery ribbons shot through his flesh. They usually were gold, for most cultivators, but not for him. He preferred it that way.

In quick succession, the ribbons pulled on his qi. The ghostly tendrils flowing through his reformed meridians were drawn in. The pieces kept in his gilded dantian. Every bit of qi in his body was drawn into one location. A moment later, his stamina and mana followed. Even his vitality. His spinning silver core drew everything into itself.

The ribbons shot outwards like grasping tendrils. They phased through his meridians and mana veins, through his cells... and where they passed, they left great lines of change. The rotating sphere, the path he had decided on, remade Mercury's body.

With all the gathered power it spun faster and faster, drawing from the <Grain of Infinity> and his unfathomably overlevelled <Truth>. He had more than enough power to fuel this ascension. Most people would be swallowing elixirs to aim for a better result, but Mercury didn't need to.

Silver light tore through him, making his skin glow as brightly as the sun. His cells, meridians, veins, everything about him was remade once more. Not just gilded, not enhanced with reality, but restructured in a way that was more true to himself. Authentic, perhaps? Or unique?

It was an interesting experience, one that drew on his own belief to sustain himself. That was why Golden-Core cultivators could stick around as remnant spirits after their death.

[<Mind over Matter> has levelled up! <Mind over Matter lv. 2 -> 3>]

The transformation was not yet done. It enhanced, changed, and improved him for a while more.

Only when he had fully had all his magical organs assimilated into one did it finally calm down. Mercury breathed in, then out, smiling faintly. A silver core spun in his chest, holding energies that fused and came apart as easily as breathing.

[<Internal Energy> has levelled up! <Internal Energy lv. 4 -> 5>]

[<Origin Qi> has levelled up! <Origin Qi lv. 2 -> 4>]

Magic thrummed in his very bones.

He rose from his seat on the roof slowly, dusting off his robes. His burnt skeleton reappeared underneath the metal and cloud clothing. Slowly but surely, he clenched his fist, felt the surety of steel residing under his skin.

He looked at the sky. Then at himself. Slowly, he regenerated, then was whole again. The sun hit his skin and it burned it away. It had slowed again, though, in their eternal race. But this time, Mercury didn't plan to give it a chance to catch up.

He'd let the Dream of Starvation finish evolving... and then, he'd pay the Heavens a visit.