

Chapter 297: More Real than Real

The world had a roof.

How fuckin' dumb was that?!

Mercury stared. His eyes bled, burnt, smoked, turned to ash, then regrew to do it all over again. He laughed, his voice driven hoarse by the incinerating heat. He looked upon the ceiling of the world and laughed till his laughter was burnt to ash. Then he laughed some more.

His fingers reached upwards. They burnt.

It would be a disservice to say anything else. The flesh melted into metal. The metal wove into flesh. It was a cycle. Boiling, burning, faltering, regenerating. Ash to flesh, flesh to ash, over and over and over. Charred, blackened bone touched the surface first, and it rippled.

The ceiling on the world had the texture of thick foam. A little tougher than a memory mattress. It was spongy and tough, and then his fingers sunk in, like breaking surface tension. The stuff clung to him, with the texture of jello, but flowing back together to smooth itself over like water.

His blackened fingers sank in, and then began to fray.

They unravelled. Not like acid, but like radiation. It was the immediate cellular degeneration that the godvein felt like. This was a domain just like his own <Rainfall>. Like his <Mercury>. It pressed against his fingers, against those foreign evaders and erased them utterly.

Mercury pulled back the stump of his hand, and for a moment, the jello clung to him. He couldn't regenerate properly, something about the very fabric of his body damaged and scarred. It was a brutal injury, one that it should have taken months to recover from.

Rain gathered around him.

Droplets of water fell onto his stump. They washed away the clinging, cloying sickness of above. Skysickness. That's what he'd decided to call it.

And he washed it away. It took a while, longer than it had ever taken for his rain to clear something. But it washed away. And then, his hand regrew, then it burnt to ash all over it again. It was stupid, ridiculous.

Mercury looked up again, and his skull turned to cinders. His eyes were washed away by the scintillating light. The fire burnt. The heavens denied him entrance. He was too mortal, not real enough, not good enough. He was not deemed worthy to even see them.

Suddenly, he understood why cultivators challenged the heavens. He laughed, then, some more. A place he hadn't been, a place he couldn't go. The *heavens*, inaccessible to him. What a joke. His parents would have found it righteous. But Mercury didn't believe in that.

No, to him, a place that he couldn't go had become more interesting than anything else.

He was a curious cat after all. He wanted to see the heavens. To see past the thin barrier, to enter into their realm and see. It was beautiful, even from the outside. A tapestry of threads of <Dreamweave>, so dense and thick that they looked alight. The <Weave> was woven so tightly it burnt. It left no gaps.

This was a defense measure, Mercury identified. It was the world's great defense against the nothingness beyond. It would let in all the things that *are* - light from the stars, the sun, anything, and keep out all that *wasn't*. Anything made from void would turn to ash even faster than he did.

Was that why the sun hated him now? Because of <Voidwalker>? That made no sense, though, since it burnt him despite that. No, Mercury knew he was beloved by this world - the System told him as much. He'd done it favours, closed wounds in its fabric, helped make it a better place.

So there was something that hated him, and it was not for who he was, it was not the world he lived on, it was something else entirely. Or someone. Mercury smiled. It was a boney grin, his skeleton revealed behind his flesh as it flaked into ash. What a dumb planet he was on. What a dumb world.

Seriously, who put a roof on a thing like a planet? And it was a place cultivators could go! Mercury knew as much. Kang could survive in the heavens. They were, after all, the passive aftereffects from domains, so surviving was easy for people who were strong enough. Some might even be able to break off pieces.

But Mercury? He wasn't welcome, wasn't allowed in. He felt an itch at that thought, an insistent discomfort on the back of his head. He wanted to know what was up there, but he couldn't have it. It was a conflict with his nature, with what he was. His species, his very existence was meant to be a creature that can go anywhere. See anything.

No need to breathe or exist, so long as he could perceive. As long as he wanted to go somewhere, he could. Wards couldn't stop him, violence couldn't stop him. And yet, despite that, he couldn't see inside the heavens.

Nothing except its first, simplistic layer. A pale sheet across the world. The white heaven. Somewhat translucent, but not enough to let him see through it. Just a few dozen metres in, it got blurry and pale, like a thick fog, trapped inside liquid glass.

That was the best description he could give. It hurt to be up there. His body burnt faster and faster, bones cracking and turning to ash. His fingertips incinerated in front of his eyes. His nerves burnt away inside his body. But the <Babbling Brook> carried away all the pain.

It didn't even hurt, physically. But it did hurt, to know that there was a place he couldn't go even if he wanted to. Just because of who he was.

Mercury breathed in, then out. Slowly, he leant backwards.

Then he fell.

He fell for a very, very long time.

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A shooting star impacted the peak of Honest Treachery. It was a brutal explosion that left a crater a dozen meters in size. The peak master himself came to investigate immediately, checking to make sure that the meteorite impact hadn't killed any disciples.

When Kang Tae-Yoon, greatest master of dastardly illusion, mass-murderer, assassin, killer among killers looked over the edge of the crater, his face fell. A painter might have named it despair, but to Kang, it was the purest, most distilled disappointment.

"Ah. Shame," he whispered. A single tear leaked from his eye and rolled down his elegant cheek. His hair blew faintly in the wind, his robes billowing as he watched. It was the end of the world, perhaps, to him. Like he'd just watched something beautiful die.

If one had looked into the middle of that crater, they would have seen a corpse. It was a dessicated husk of a man, an ashen skeleton. It was dead as a doorknob, ruined beyond belief, and it was the thing that Kang mourned.

Not a person, but an idea. The wonderful curiosity that finally matched his own. Kang Tae-Yoon killed people because it revealed their deepest insides. 'A man was most honest with a knife through his heart,' the peak master always said. And yet, he mourned, because he'd lost someone who could find that truth without spilling blood.

And that curiosity had killed him.

Of course, he only mourned until the corpse got up.

In a single, fluid spasm, strings of silver coalesced around the ruined bones. They poured out of them like suddenly spun spiderwebs, wrapping around blackened ossic fragments. They wrapped and writhed, forming muscles, veins, and meridians. They writhed into the shape of skin, and then an ethereal fog rose above them.

Before the peak master could glimpse fair skin, it was already smoking again. A stormcloud wrapped around it a moment later, wrapping it in a white robe like that of a cultivator. Stygian, nightmarish metal covered the man's legs and feet, forming a pair of pants and shoes.

Slowly, with a bone-weary sigh, the once-skeleton rose, cracked his neck, then shrugged. "Ahhh," he bemoaned. "I'm annoyed. It's real pretty up there, y'know, Juno? But I can't get in."

From the cracks in the ground, the shadows stirred and gathered. Darkness coalesced around the man's feet, casting his silhouette onto the ground. It wavered a bit, as if in reply, and he sighed.

"Yeah, you're right. Only a matter of time." With a gentle movement, he placed a veiled hat on his head, though it did little to conceal the smoke drifting off him and the smell of charcoal. Mercury took a deep breath, then faced Kang, who stood there.

The peak master's jaw hung open, stunned at what he had just seen. "How?" he simply asked.

Mercury shrugged, brushed some dust off his clothes, then stepped out of the crater. "<Fall Damage Resistance>," he said, as if it explained anything. In truth, terminal velocity couldn't

kill him anymore. The fall itself had done him barely any damage, to be frank. It was all the baleful sunlight.

Then, he walked out of the crater, patted Kang on the shoulder, and headed back for the tunnels and his safehouse. "I'll be ascending to Gilded tomorrow," Mercury said. "If you want to see, be there."

Kang didn't turn. For a moment, he was quiet. The only noise on the mountain was the howling wind.

The peak master twitched. His hands darted to a hidden knife, and he turned halfway - then he froze.

Mercury was looking at him. Through the veiled hat, over his shoulders. Just looking. He didn't activate any Skill, didn't trigger an intimidation effect, but Kang caught his pale purple eyes through the veil, anyways. They stared at him with such intensity that it made a shiver run up his back.

"Please don't do this right now," Mercury said politely, his voice as cold as ice. "I'm really, really not in the mood."

Slowly, and very gently, Kang Tae-Yoon placed his most prized dagger back into the hidden pocket in his robes. He raised his arms in a placating gesture, then Mercury nodded, and walked off. The peak master remained standing like that for a full minute, maybe two, until the shivers disappeared.

"Wow," he said quietly, breathing in the solitude. "That's the closest I've gotten to death in a handful of years..."

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Mercury made his way to the safehouse. There were a few amateurish traps on the way there - but he avoided them all easily enough. With long, quick steps, he tore through space, his frame warping. He stepped through walls, through distant tunnels, scanning ahead by dozens, hundreds of metres with his perception.

To most of the disciples he was little more than a gust of wind. A bizarre, pale gale that rustled their cloaks and tore through the tunnels in odd motions. It was the second odd weather phenomenon of the day, though discussions on whether that was a coincidence were fraught.

After all, most of the disciples of honest treachery were far too busy talking about the red beast.

But that's another story, one that Mercury didn't even know of. The mopaaw himself simply darted to his safehouse, opened the door, stepped in, and closed it.

Inside, there was no noise. It was quiet. A loud, suffocating quiet, the kind that sank deep into the walls and bones of a building and smothered all sound. It was kind of like a security blanket, and yet, it also reminded Mercury that he was alone, in many ways.

Juno tried to assuage him, pressing against his legs with her warm fur, and he reached down to ruffle it with a hand once, but it didn't change the strangely hollow feelings in his heart. It was odd to be so upset over something so... trivial. But he felt deeply upset by this kind of hatred.

Because he was hated, and he just didn't get why yet. It was such an odd, disconcerting feeling. He felt that he shouldn't care, but at the same time, it barred the way to something he wanted to see. Something beyond this planet, beyond this world.

Could he slip out? In between the seems, travel using the void, then see from the other side? Maybe. Maybe he could.

But there was another way.

Cultivators ascended to the Gilded-Realm by consuming a piece of heaven - through tribulation lightning, through stealing it, interacting with it, anything like that. They must all have faint domains or auras like he did, then. But he had only barely felt them.

So, if their auras were so faint, Mercury guessed they'd have to cultivate to strengthen them. He did that, too, after all. But his was far more developed.

In a way, cultivators ate domains to gain them. But he already had one. Not just one, really. He had two fully developed domains, ready to deploy. So why bother eating that of someone else, when he had his own? Even if he did consume a piece of heaven, Mercury imagined it would just be added to his dreamworld.

No, instead, he would elevate his body beyond the mortal by his own right. He was a self-made man, after all.

In front of him, he pulled out the dozens of scrolls that he had gotten. From Mutilation, Slaughter, Treachery... Words upon words were sprawled out across the pages. They spoke of nascent divinity, awakening the spirit within the self, of transcending the mundane.

At the heart of cultivation, there was still defiance. Cultivators were people that looked at the heavens, at things above them, and pulled at them. They'd use anything and anyone as a stepping stone to elevate themselves higher. It was a whole philosophy, with sub-schools inside it, but at its very core, it was all about climbing.

Climbing higher. Often that involved tearing others down - but not always. In some way, it was about uplifting, too. But that didn't matter.

Mercury tossed all those thoughts into the can. He wasn't interacting with anyone else right now. He wasn't stealing power, he wasn't gifting it to anyone, he was interacting in a purely self-contained way with his own powers. He breathed in, then out, and discarded all those worries.

Instead of focusing on what could be, he focused on what was. His own power, his own body. He didn't need to temper himself with a fragment of heaven, he could just temper himself with his own domain.

Closing his eyes, Mercury meditated.

This place was precious. He didn't want to damage it, since it was a safehouse, and it'd be a real shame if Zyl came home to broken furniture. So, instead of breaking the house, Mercury overlaid something on top of it.

<Dream Manifestation>.

Green grass bloomed from wooden floorboards. Earth sprawled out over them. A patchwork sky crawled across the ceiling, covering it in shades of purple and lilac. Mercury breathed as his inner world displaced the safehouse. He made carefully sure it didn't grow out beyond the walls, instead just stretching the inside of the building.

Bit by bit, it still grew. Until it showed distant landmarks. A fountain, a citadel, a castle, and the mountains. There were wrought iron benches and lanterns under a silver sun, garden beds and gravel paths lining the landscape. Kim, his gardener, was hard at work taking care of trees, and Whisperstar flitted through the air, playing with... a butterfly.

Huh.

Mercury, however, was focused. So, he didn't let the strange sounds and sights distract him. This place was becoming more vibrant, bit by bit. And he loved that about it. But right now, he needed to cause some trouble, and so, to avoid damaging this place as much as possible, Mercury walked into the distance.

Not that 'distance' meant much in this place, of course. He could walk forever and stay in place, or end up in a different biome after a single step. This time, though, space behaved almost normally.

So, it took him a few hundred steps off the beaten path until he was in a relatively flat, relatively empty area. Of course, walking a few hundred steps across a grassy plain without leaving his house was certainly a strange way to consider something behaving almost normally, but then again, Mercury's normal was a little odd overall.

Once he was out there, had a bit of his own space, the first thing Mercury did was to summon the Stifled Silence. The silver diadem grew as a wreath around his forehead. Vines of metal intertwined, holding a single amber gemstone in its center.

Instantly, the world grew quieter. Mercury felt it resonate with his <Mercury>, the liquid metal beginning to grow and swell as a tide, without even being summoned. A heartbeat passed, then two, and then Mercury released the pressure.

A torrential buildup of metal spilled outward, gliding over the ground like an infestation - then crashing into an invisible wall. All at once, the metal splashed and crawled upwards, forming perfectly smooth walls. And finally, a roof.

Within seconds, Mercury found himself encased in a metallic box. A safety measure, not for himself, but for the outside world. Tribulation lightning was rather destructive, so Mercury feared he'd need to be rather violent in his power use, too. So, just in case, he'd boxed himself in. Surely that'd be enough. Surely.

Sighing softly, Mercury read over all the scrolls once more. His shadow wavered for a moment, then detached from his body, sneaking to the corner of the box. Mercury let her. Slowly, he controlled his breathing.

Cultivation was about the ascent. About the relentless desire to climb ever higher. Mercury visualised the ceiling in the world, and the way it made him feel to be locked in. Was it stupid to feel 'locked in' when his jail was a whole planet? Maybe. But he didn't care.

He didn't like it. It made him angry and upset. He wanted to see more. He wanted to go where he wasn't meant to go. Mercury was a kind, calm, patient person. But he didn't make compromises about his freedoms. He didn't usually let people hold him or touch him, he didn't let himself be caged. It was one of his greatest flaws and one of the things he liked the most about himself.

So, he needed to climb. He wanted to climb so desperately, to take that next step. And to take it, he needed to be stronger.

At that thought, the winds in the metal box rose. Slowly but surely, the air stirred and began to move. A hint of ozone in the air, a brewing storm.

There was no way he'd abide by a prison. It didn't matter how big it was, he wanted to go beyond it, to see the world from the other side of the cell. Even if the truth was ugly, even if the things on the outside were horrible, even if everything there hated him, he needed to see it.

The winds picked up. Small clouds coalesced on the roof of his metal box, raindrops falling to the silver floor. Juno hissed in pain when they touched her, the wrath of the storm unrestrained. But she was here to face it.

Mercury felt anger.

He didn't let his <Babbling Brook> carry it away, either. He let himself be angry. At his own impotence to break the jail cell. At his helplessness against the ruthless light of the sun. When its beams hit him, he burnt to ash. As if his whole journey until now was meaningless.

Sure, he adapted. His skin grew stronger, and the sun did less damage - but its fury seemed to ramp up even faster than that. Even down here, in his dream, it still almost reached him. Mercury felt the faint itch on his skin. He hadn't been without sunburn for weeks now.

And he was tired of it. Tired of this all. He wanted more. The godvein, the heavens, all of them held a simple truth - Mercury was very real. But he wasn't real enough. His existence just wasn't tight enough, was it, now? Okay. He could knit himself tighter.

The stormclouds thickened, then turned black. Faint, staticky flashes of light cut through the blackness, illuminating Mercury's fur. He shone silver-purple in those brief moments. Raindrops fell on his fur with the force of bulldozers. They tore through his body, shattered bones, tore flesh, leaving faint, circular holes on him.

Mercury was tough. Unbelievably tough, really. But his own storm still hurt him, because it made those defenses meaningless. He wrapped it in <Weapon Intent>, and the storm listened. Lightning wrapped in silver struck down, slamming into Mercury.

His fur charred, and electricity dug a web of charcoal through his body. It hurt. And he discarded the pain like trash. He wasn't here to hurt himself and throw a pity party. This was proving to the world that he was more than he was. It was absorbing a part of this storm.

It was *his* storm. He wanted it to hit him with everything it had so that he could claim that ownership. He was the storm. He was Mercury Starlight Rainfall. And when the rain fell onto his body, he shattered, then reformed a little more real.

Every raindrop, after all, was woven. It tore through the air, breaking threads, picking them up as a small bundle of <Dreamweave>. He could use his <Mercury> to hold crumbling worlds together, to weave them back into place... so he had to be able to do the same thing with <Rainfall>, couldn't he?

Inherently, just by being made by him, they were real. The raindrops smashed through things so easily because they were simply more real than anything. That's why Mercury was able to resist them at all - why they smashed his bones and tore his flesh instead of cutting a clean path through.

His body was reformed, filled with his willpower. It was a dense web of inscriptions, meridians, mana veins... a tapestry of all the things he'd ever achieved. He'd completely inverted it and walked through the void. He knew the touch of reality. He'd devoured whole worlds, and twisted them into something else entirely.

And yet, he was deemed not real enough? No, he was real. He was plenty real. More than real enough to show as much.

Raindrops slammed into him, and dug deep, but they didn't tear through him. Mercury was dense, and he made himself denser. They tore through him violently, but didn't exit anymore. Instead, he forced the water to a stop.

Lightning arced through him, but his muscles channelled the power instead of letting go. He refused to be scorched. His storm fell in a brutal, violent onslaught. It waged a war with his body, with his mind, with the very box he had locked himself in. <Rainfall> struck against <Mercury>, his own powers clashing against each other as disaster and containment, sword and shield, violence and gentleness.

Mercury sat in the rain. He simmered, nursing the anger, the curiosity and most of all, his desperate need for freedom. It was almost compulsive. He loved the freedom he had gained, and to see it challenged was a terror beyond anything he'd felt before. This kind of ceiling was unacceptable. It was scary.

And so, he rose above it.

Raindrops fell against Mercury's skin, digging in an inch, perhaps, before his flesh arrested their fall. Winds tore at him, but left only superficial lacerations. Lightning bolts struck him, and the electricity just made his heart beat faster.

Mercury breathed in, then out. To become gilded was to be dense. He wove, and wove, and wove again. He created the storm, then stole its energy. He turned it into himself. Drew it tighter.

The stormclouds balled up. Coalesced around him. Blanked out the entire world. The lightning bolts grew brutal, shaking his body again. The winds were so cold and violent, they almost tore him in half. Each raindrop was like an icicle digging into him.

And yet, he endured. Denser and denser yet he made himself. Pushed the storm around himself. Dragged the containment-cage tighter. Liquid Mercury tightened, forcing the clouds against his skin, then *inside* of it.

Juno had run, already tempered, when Mercury went further. He pushed his domains up against his body. He forced, with his mind, and his bones creaked under the pressure. They broke, then reformed, then broke again, but the pain was only physical. No, he was reshaping himself.

His very existence was changing once more. When he began to fail and falter, he simply willed himself to breathe again. When his heart exploded, a new one formed. It didn't matter. He was making a body for himself, making a proper body, elevating it.

The storm sank underneath his skin. Raindrops spawned inside his blood, and his thoughts were the wind. Liquid metal was pulled into his pores, lacing his muscles, his meridians, his bones. He'd reforged himself from Mercury, and now, he was reborn again with it.

<Rainfall> reached his heart, and he left it. The clouds travelled through his veins and nestled there, not trapped, but *at home*. He'd always been the storm. He'd used it to fill his lungs, to fill the world, and now, he filled himself. Liquid metal nestled in his bones, because he was strong and flowing. If broken, he would reform again.

Mercury breathed out. He opened his eyes. He <Unravelled> himself, then watched the <Tapestry> that might make him a person. In a moment, he saw his traits unspooled, a dense, beautiful weave. Then, he drew it back together, snapping into shape.

The threads that made his existence spun tighter now. Tighter and ever tighter. His <Truth> was a burning beacon in his chest, and he knew he had reached the Gilded–Realm by the silvery bands stretching across his dantian, like imprints of stormclouds. But more than that, he knew he was himself.

[Your understanding of the <Dreamweave> has increased! <Dreamweave (medium) -> (high)>]

[<Truth> has levelled up! <Truth lv. 7 -> 8>]

Mercury breathed in, held it, then breathed out. He had proven himself... to himself.

[You have acquired the Skill <Enhance Reality lv. 1> through a specific action!]

And that was his proof.