

Chapter 292: Loss' Final Stage

'Oh, I get it now,' Mercury thought.

For days, he'd studied the texts laid out in front of him. Half a dozen techniques - usually, people were only given one of them, a simple one, to get started. They could redo their reforging and start over if needed, though most chose to continue with their first option, just because of time constraints. And convenience. People didn't want to lose their hand again after just regaining it.

Mercury, of course, was different. He had lost and remade his own body before, and even now, there was the option of just tapping into the reservoirs of regenerated flesh he had, by just quitting the bet. But there was something he wanted to do.

To remake himself without the use of those abilities. To follow the manuals and make his own body, from the ground up. He wanted it all back. His sense of smell and taste and touch and sight - everything that was his. He wanted to hear the rain, feel the wind, and so on and so forth.

And he didn't want to lose the bet. He'd do it as cultivators did - from zero. Reforging. It would be shameful to rely on his Skills for it, even if they were *his*. He had the option to start from the ground, so he did.

Now, he got it. Finally understood what it was all about.

The scrolls weren't so different from each other. They were all about reforging, of course, but that was putting it too simply. No, through them, he had to get at the idea of what the Reforging-Realm stood for. What it represented in the grand scheme of cultivation.

Getting in touch with qi, clearing ones meridians, which the Rusted-Realm encompassed was like oiling a machine. Shaking off the very literal rust, getting an understanding of qi, which, in the end, meant to communicate more closely with the world.

To Mercury, it looked like the Rusted-Realm was about understanding, taking the first step. It was a commitment to oneself, to hear out the world and find strength in that. It was a commitment to understand the self, too.

And now, to reforge oneself was to make good on that commitment. It was why, even after reforging, Su ShouFan lacked an arm and her eyes. Because while she *could* have gotten those body parts back, or might have lost them after her reforging - he didn't have her full story - she didn't get them back.

They were, in a way, a promise, too. To be true to herself. A promise to get revenge on the world for what it did to her. That's why she was a cultist.

Righteous reforging looked different. It was a more normal promise, perhaps. He couldn't quite estimate what it would be like, but he did imagine it would be just as self-serving. After all, reforging was always about oneself. Righteous reforging was probably about loyalty or devotion to some sect or organisation.

Which was kinda weird and brainwashed, but then again, he'd seen two families perpetuate a pointless war just to steal resources from each other. Sending people who were barely adults to their death. So, maybe he was right to not respect the righteous sects and clans either.

With a small sigh, he turned back to the scrolls in front of him. He traced his <Worldsense> over the pages one more time. The text conveyed a lot, the author had clearly put their own experience into it. Cultivation was a lot about emotions, too, after all. That was why erratic characters tended to rise higher in the ranks.

It was even seen as normal to be a little eccentric if one was a hidden monster. That was partially why Mercury had received such mellow receptions whenever he had proven himself to be strong. People knew to expect oddness from strong cultivators.

That was where Mercury suspected the overlap between cultivation and the system to be, too. After all, the system rewarded desire - and, to a degree, so did cultivation. Intense emotions beget rewards. Hence the extreme methods. Battles to the death, starving in a cave, meditating on top of mountaintops, seeking out novel experiences.

Emotions breed desire, desire breeds power.

Mercury breathed in, then out.

Reforging. That was what it came down to. Right now, he was in front of a choice, where he made a promise to himself. A promise of what he wanted from his body, from this world. A simple metaphor.

The techniques laid out in front of him all dealt with loss. Loss of limb, loss of loved ones, loss of senses. It was a set of scrolls that directed him to harden himself, to pick the direction he wished to walk and steel his heart.

Not to be emotionless and dreary, but to walk his own path with resolve to be true. To choose whether he wanted to be cruel or kind, but most importantly, to *commit*. It was why redoing ones reformatting until finding the right direction was important.

Because it was a vital decision. A set of directives written in blood and bone. And it was all so amusing.

Mercury found it... petty, almost. A desperate reach for something truer than the self, a reach for a promise unbroken. Scrolls marked by betrayal that had happened, traumatized by loss. And he saw that as the universal connector between it all.

Every single one of these authors regretted something. They wanted it back, they wanted revenge, they wanted justice or peace or anything else. And Mercury thought that was kind of beautiful in its own, messed up way. They were all so obsessed with their past loss that all they could think was to try to rebuild, in a narrow-minded, singular path. It had to be straightforward, because otherwise, they couldn't see a path forward at all.

And now, here he was. At the precipice of doing the same thing. And he thought that was funny.

Perhaps, he thought, there was something to be said about loss. About the emotions one went through when losing. All in all, that entire journey would be called <Grief>, he thought.

Grief incorporated a lot of things, of course. It usually involved denial, anger, bargaining, sadness and acceptance. Many steps, of course, but that was in a world where that loss couldn't be undone. It was in a world with final death, without resurrection or magic.

Mercury thought that this wasn't enough. These authors, these techniques, every single one of them had lost things. Limbs, loved ones, a life. Something needed to change for them, and their entire life was baked into those scrolls.

Not a single one of them accepted their fate.

All of them had been crushed in one way or another. All of them got back up. They decided to be cruel or kind. They went blind to things to move forward stubbornly. They cried for vengeance and blood. And each one made a new path.

Reforged themselves. Women burnt down families, men razed cities to the ground. People tended to the poor and the lost, creating safe havens. They all needed purpose.

So, perhaps, the final stage of loss wasn't acceptance. It wasn't lying down and taking it. It was much more complex than that.

It was reforging. To take things as they are, but to make the choice to live on anyways. To find closure, to rebuild one's own happiness.

For many people here, that meant regaining function of missing body parts. For some, it meant starting a new family after losing their loved ones. It could mean bloody murder on anyone who wronged them.

But in the end, every single one of the people hadn't given up. And Mercury thought that loss must mean a lot of things to a lot of people. It was depressing, defeating, humiliating, frustrating, and aggravating. But it was also survivable.

Mercury had been mutilated. Right now, he had lost much. His body was gone, and there was a chance he couldn't regain it. That was scary. But he didn't dwell on that. He couldn't properly understand the experience of never having hope to begin with, of having to claw it from the ground, but in a world with magic, there was always a chance to recover.

That was what made Chronagen wonderful, he thought. Desire brought about power. These people had lost, and wanted things back, and they *got them*. Even if their desires were selfish or unfair, sometimes they got granted.

So, he had to do it too. To grit his teeth and decide to live on. To fully embrace life, and remake himself with the promise to do just that - to live. Wholeheartedly.

He understood. That the final stage of loss wasn't losing. It was finding the will to live all over again.

That the final stage of <Grief> wasn't acceptance, it was happiness.

The ultimate favour he could do for himself was to look at everything that was gone, and decide to be happy anyway.

Mercury breathed.

He had no body, but he did it anyway.

Silver-white metal spooled out of him in an endless torrent. It was a sea that consumed everything. From the mountain peak he meditated on, it spilled outwards, flooding across rocks, climbing into the sky and clinging to the clouds.

A violent wave of choking quicksilver spilling forth like a tsunami. It engulfed rocks, spilled over rice paddies, choked the colour from the very world. It wasn't his crown summoning it, he didn't wear the stifled silence, it was simply his own grief manifesting, in an endless outpour.

Silvery ribbons spun from the torrential downpour, cycling back upwards. The streams grew chaotic, floating rivers of metal carrying the sea of mercury back to Mercury. He saw himself reflected in a thousand liquid mirrors - nothing at all.

He didn't exist. And yet, he saw his reflection, that of someone who'd lost and grieved and refused to move on even when he promised himself to. And if he could, he'd still bring his dead friends back. Even if he lied to himself about it, even if he said it was okay, it wasn't. He didn't want to lose anyone.

But he would. Inevitably, people would die. Yasashiku was already growing old, for example. So were others. People would die.

And he'd live on anyway.

He'd <Grieve>. He'd live. He'd find happiness anyway.

[Your understanding of <Grief> has increased. <Grief (high) -> (pinnacle)>]

[<Grief (pinnacle) resonates with **you**.]

[<Grief (pinnacle)> becomes <Mercury (lowest)>.]

Mercury felt the change ripple through his ability. It shifted it, at its very core, into something more personally aligned to him. Just how <Breath> had become <Rainfall>. Now, his grief had become part of him, with the decision to move past it.

He breathed - and he found he could breathe. Because he did have a body again. All of this was him, and yet, none of it was. It was his domain, properly, and it was coalescing back into him.

A great torrent of silver metal had torn through the mountain. Somehow, it had spilled across houses and cliffsides, across fields and into the sky and damaged nothing. No one was hurt. In fact, the spilling currents of silver washed away people's wounds.

Vitality coursed out into the world, his <Grain of Infinity> burning at his core as energy was being produced and outputted. And then reabsorbed, of course.

The tsunami of metal was, after all, still bound to him. It rose when it crashed into walls, reverted its flow, spilling upwards, then back to him. It glittered in the faint light of the moon, ghostly ribbons dancing through the air with a distinct destination.

All heading for the mountaintop. All spilling into a shape too small to hold them.

Mercury was a person. He wouldn't call himself a human, not anymore, because he wasn't one, not really. It wasn't his species, and it didn't really matter. Even if he wasn't a human, he was still *human*. He'd maintained his personhood, he thought.

So, his shape didn't matter. What did matter is that he could experience the world with it. That he could have senses, that he could live, that he could see and laugh. That was what really mattered to him. That he'd cast a shadow for Juno to live in, for as long as she needed, and that he could hold Zyl's hand whenever the dragon had it rough, and so that he could stop blades when they threatened to cut precious things.

Loss was cruel. It was inevitable, even, and Mercury, deep down, knew he'd lose again. But he also knew that he'd live on. That he'd prevent it, when he could. That he wanted this world to be a better, kinder place, for almost anyone. A place where kids didn't have to eat their parents. A place where women wouldn't be maimed, where men wouldn't be forced to flee their homes.

Mercury reshaped himself. Torrents of quicksilver flowed into the mountain, compressing, resolving down into a shape. He didn't assimilate them, that skill was blocked, and he didn't resolve himself either. No, he was doing this with his qi.

His channels were being burnt into the world, his <Origin Qi> suffusing and compressing the metal down. His body was growing solid, liquid silver spilling into itself, compressing and compressing over and over again. Tons of it, enough to choke a mountain, enough to turn a whole world static, enough for Yearning to have once frozen things in time, all flowed into one point.

A simple shape, as if the mold was cast in the air. Mercury condensed an arm, first, to feel the world. It was cast in solid silver, and glimmered in the moonlight. The baleful light already was carving at him again, but he didn't even begrudge it that. He was too busy remaking himself.

After a moment, a leg followed, then another arm. He cast himself from liquid metal, so dense that it almost screamed, but it never would. Because it was *him*, and he would never be horrified at his own shape.

Bit by bit, he made himself a body. It was, once more, almost human. He had sharp teeth, and his nails were almost claws. His silvery hair spilled a little further down his back, touching his shoulderpads, but he still kept his short beard. His eyes were simple marbles of metal, at first.

Yet, when the outline finished, colour swiftly followed. Mercury's skin turned pale, his eyes purple and endlessly deep, his nails a little darker than his skin. He wove himself into being with a simple choice, he stepped past his limitations and remade himself. He created things he'd never had, yes, because he wanted them.

A dantian to sit in his chest and hold his qi. Channels through which it could move as easily as breathing. He wrought all of it into his own body, as easily as forging a nail, something he'd done thousands, millions of times - because there was no effort needed. He already knew who he was, what he wanted. This was just realizing it.

Making that choice was the hard part. Deciding, selfishly, to be whole. But he forgave himself that selfishness - because he wouldn't forget. Wouldn't forget what it was like to be helpless, to have to rely on others, and that it was what people did. What society was for.

So, with this body of his, with the ocean of silver cast into a human form, he clenched his fist. Muscles rippled under smoking skin, even as his robes and pants manifested from nothing, and he smiled. Then, he took his first proper, deep breath, and smelled the night.

The air tasted of rain and earth. And it was wonderful.

"It feels so good to live," he said, to no one but himself. And it really did.

[<Assimilate lv. 2> has fused with <Tempered Body lv. 7>]

[Acquired the Skill <Mind over Matter lv. 1> through fusing Skills.]

[<Mind over Matter>: The individual in possession of this Skill has created their entirely unique Reforging-art - *Mind over Matter*. You may absorb any material to become part of your body. You possess an extradimensional space where additional materials may be stored. Anything you assimilate will instantly increase in stability in proportion to willpower. Whenever you experience any emotion or stimulus, your body will improve. Your being reshapes itself at your behest. Your mind's ability to interact with the physical world is strengthened. Your senses are heightened. Your ability to channel energy grows exponentially.]

Mercury read through the description a little while later, smiling at it. In short, it was a pretty comprehensive upgrade to everything his previous Skill had been and then some. It also had a cooler name. <Mind over Matter>. That suited him quite a bit!

He could instantly feel the changes, but he didn't instantly try them out. Instead, he waited, putting his hands behind his back. It didn't take very long at all for Su ShouFan to appear before him - in fact, his current teacher had been watching his reforging the entire time, from high up in the sky.

"Congratulations," she spoke softly. "You have made it into the Reforging-Realm, my disciple. And quite spectacularly so. I don't believe that you're practicing any of the techniques I offered you."

Smiling softly, Mercury shook his head. "I'm not, no. But I learnt from them, and from you." He bowed softly, just a few degrees. A gesture of thanks, not deference. "I appreciate you teaching me."

"We are not done yet," peak master Su said. Her empty sleeve fluttered in the wind, midnight blue catching the moonlight. "You have a few more days with me, and I aim to bring you as high as I can in that time."

Ah. That made sense. His bet hadn't completed yet, had it? That meant he'd only reached initial proficiency with his current reforging-art. It was barely in the stages of infancy. He'd remade his body, yes, but he could do more. Always more.

His smile grew at the thought of that, and he nodded once more. "I look forward to learning from you."

Su ShouFan gave him a sad smile, and shook her head. "No," she said, extending her hand out forward. With a crackle of ice, a sword grew in it, made from crystals so pure Mercury would've sworn it was carved from glass. "No, I don't think you'll enjoy this."

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The next three days were... relatively intense, Mercury would say. Reforging was all about reaching one's self-centered pinnacle. About keeping true to those promises you made, and finding ways to become a little tougher.

Mercury, of course, was already plenty tough. Even with just an initial reforging, his body was literally as tough as metal - stronger than that, really, considering his ample willpower suffusing it. And yet, he was cut apart.

Su ShouFan wielded her icy sword with abandon. She wasn't afraid he'd retaliate, because that wasn't the point of the exercise. Normal students might take ice baths at this stage, or starve themselves for a while, engage in sparring, and heal from bruises. But Mercury could recover from far worse injuries, so this was the fastest way to make his proficiency grow.

So, with some dejectedness, he looked at the stump of his arm. Silvery metal was already pouring from the wound, as if cast into an invisible mold, swiftly reforming his arm. The icy cold that crept up to his shoulder turned him a little numb, until it was worn away by his internal defenses.

Even when his blood turned to ice in his veins, it quickly thawed again. The glassy sword left wound after wound on him, and all Mercury did was defend himself. It wouldn't kill him, though it did chill his mind. Sometimes, he'd feel his thoughts grow slow and sluggish, the exhaustion wearing him down. Right now, he wasn't built for staying awake for days on end, and yet he did.

They'd moved to a deep cavern below the mountain, a place of terrible cold, full of icy crystals. The sun didn't reach there, so it wouldn't burn Mercury's skin - that wouldn't be in the spirit of the exercise. No, instead, he defended himself against slash after slash, brutal wound after brutal wound.

The floor was coated in his blood, already frozen there. It was slippery. He was tired, freezing cold, and his body was pushed to its limits. And yet, he didn't lash out. He endured.

Mercury firmly believed that suffering *didn't* build character, so he had no issue letting <Babbling Brook> carry most of the pain away. He didn't feel agony when his limbs separated, though of course, part of that was because of his rather odd nervous system.

Pain, after all, was the body warning that damage was being done. But if he could regenerate a torn-off hand in seconds, then was that really so dangerous? It hurt about as much as scratching an itch a little too long, at this point.

Of course, the chilling cold ran deeper than that, more painful. It even chipped at his mind a little. But that was of little concern either. All it did was make him more exhausted, wear him down, and that was fine. Mercury was alright with that.

What he didn't enjoy was having his memories carved into.

It was a technique Su ShouFan had barely just developed during their spar. Only implementing it on the second day, even. But he noticed. The qi around her sword shifted, and when she struck, it carved a gash into his memories.

That hurt. Not any physical pain, but just the simple absence of something he knew he should know. He couldn't remember Avery's face.

For a moment, there, he was furious. Before he could even think about it, he'd fought back. Smashed the ice-sword to pieces with a single, feral motion. He wanted, desperately, to remember. How *dare* ShouFan take something precious from him?

And then, desire bred power.

His mind snapped back into place, healed itself, and the wound disappeared. Avery's face fell back in place like a suddenly completed puzzle. Mercury blinked.

Very slowly, he breathed in, then out, then finally withdrew his fury. "That was close," he said calmly, smiling faintly. "Warn me next time. I almost killed you."

Su ShouFan swallowed dryly, her face covered in faint, fearful sweat. Despite that, she nodded, a new sword forming in her hands already. "Yes," she said quietly. "That makes sense. My apologies, disciple. I had thought the surprise would make for a good teaching tool."

"It did," Mercury agreed. "But it was a close thing. I do not wish to hurt you, yet I almost did. My apologies. Continue."

From then on, it wasn't only Mercury's body that received wounds, but his mind that was reforged, too. Over and over again.