

Chapter 286: Munching

"I'm not gonna eat that," Mercury said.

"Oh come on!" Pali protested. "I even cooked it."

Frowning slightly, Mercury pointed at the piece of... questionable food. "That's not cooked," he said. "That's a piece of coal on a stick." Indeed, the object in question was impaled on a piece of spirit wood, and Pali had 'cooked' it by holding it into an open flame. Until it was entirely black and charred.

Pali pouted at his refusal, then shrugged. "Fine!" she said haughtily, then shoved it into her own mouth. For a moment, her eyes went wide, and she even started to tear up. Mercury could imagine that the taste was unpleasant. Despite that, the girl diligently chewed the piece of food, and then swallowed.

"See?" she asked with tears in her eyes. "Totally delicious."

Mercury snickered softly, then nodded. "Of course," he said. "But I'm not eating... another living creature, actually. I think I'm vegetarian." Which was an odd thing to say given that he could very well eat information. Like, she could tell him a story, and it would probably taste better than the burnt meat she'd offered.

At his declaration, Pali frowned. The misery of her last meal was quickly forgotten as she narrowed her eyes. "Then... what am I meant to teach you?" she asked.

"How would I know?" Mercury said with a shrug. "You have my full attention for a few days. I dunno what you're meant to be teaching me."

"Well, I can teach you how to bite," she offered with a smile, leaning forward and baring a surprisingly well-maintained set of chompers.

Tilting his head softly, Mercury thought it over. "I do have the <Bite> Skill."

"Unevolved?" Pali asked.

He nodded.

"Wow, that's kind of sad," she said. Mercury just kind of stared at her for the comment. Then, she giggled and laughed, and gave him another smile. "Alright. Bite me!"

"I'd really, like, rather not," Mercury said.

"Then how will I teach you to bite!"

Sighing softly, Mercury smacked his own face. Zyl snickered in amusement at his misery, and even his shadow seemed to waver gently with Juno's amusement. "You have to be kidding me," he whispered to himself. "I come here to learn the mysteries of the universe, and what I get is a little girl telling me to bite her."

Seeking help, Mercury raised his head. Facing Pali's expectant expression, he sighed. "Can't I just... chew rocks or something?" he asked.

The girl tilted her head. "You can't eat rocks, silly."

"Yes, I can."

"Cannot!"

"I can."

"No way!"

"I can," Mercury insisted, and before the girl interrupted him again, he held up a hand. "Watch," he said. Then, he picked up a piece of gravel from the ground, and put it in his mouth. With a crunch, he sank his teeth into the bits of rock and soil and dust. He grimaced slightly at the taste, but then used <Babbling Brook> to carry his sensation of taste away.

That just left him with the texture which was... well, it felt like he'd chip his teeth, but he wasn't exactly human anymore. His fangs sank against the stone and cracked it, empowered by his vitality and his <Tempered Body>. He was too tough for these kinds of mundane rocks to cause him trouble.

And so, with a wide-eyed Pali watching, Mercury ate rocks. "Crunchy," he said, cracking one of them in half. The girl, somehow, flinched at that. Apparently eating charcoal was just fine with her, but rocks were too far? Bizarre.

Actually, this made him think of all the other odd stuff that looked tasty. He could probably eat lava these days. Very slowly, he looked over to Zyl. The dragon tilted his head at Mercury. And then, Mercury broke out in a smile.

“Hey Pali, you’ve seen me eat rocks, yeah?” he said.

The girl nodded energetically, too stunned to talk. Mercury’s grin widened, and Zyl’s eyes narrowed.

“My darling boyfriend,” the mopaaw started, “would you be so kind as to prepare a delicious cup of lava for me?”

Zyl stared at him.

Mercury stared back.

Very slowly, the dragon brought his hand to his face. “Really?”

“Really.”

Sighing softly, Zyl resigned himself to his fate, and began to search for the nearest usable rock.

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[<Nutritional Preservation> has levelled up! <Nutritional Preservation lv. 5 -> 7>]

“Is it spicy?” Pali asked. “It looks spicy.”

“Not particularly,” Mercury said, a little disappointed. Unfortunately, his tastebuds didn’t really get a whole lot out of lava. Of course, <Nutritional Preservation> helped that along, giving it a kind of acidic taste. A little sweet, too. Kind of like a really mild, thick soda. More like jello than soda, really. “Sweet, actually.”

“Huh,” Pali noted, looking at the lava floating in front of Mercury and drooling a little. “I kind of wanna bite...”

“Absolutely not,” Zyl chided, and shook his head. Flames still streamed from his palm onto the mass of molten rock, even as Mercury drank more of it, through a straw made from the Dream of Starvation.

Pali pouted and crossed her arms, but didn't object further. Mercury chewed the lava a little, which was an odd sensation, since the rock was still made from crystalline structures, so he could feel them grinding against each other and shifting in his mouth. But he still ate it.

"Neat," Mercury commented. "Good to have tested that out."

"Somehow, this experiment has given me a level in <Cooking>," Zyl noted.

At that, Mercury and Pali snickered a little. The mopaaw was glad that things were shaping up to not be that bad. Even though the little girl was a bit of a monster, she was, admittedly, a cute one. So, Mercury sighed, and smiled softly. He reached out and ruffled her hair.

"Alright," he said. "How about you teach me how to properly absorb energy from what I eat? I know you use your technique on human flesh and all that, but I'm reasonably sure I can make it work for, like, magic rocks and metals. Probably."

"I wanna eat magic rocks!" Pali protested, shaking her small fists. Apparently, all it had taken to convince her was one lava-smoothie. Granted, lava did look really tasty, so Mercury understood. But still.

Gently, he had to shake his head. "Sorry, but I don't think I can teach you that very well."

"You shouldn't teach me!" she complained with a pout, crossing her arms. "I'll just learn it myself. You'll see! I'll find you tasty rocks."

And with that, the energetic girl ran off, speeding away to raid some treasury or other. Mercury sighed softly, then laid down on his back. The veil from his hat fell over his face again, even though it was nighttime.

Holding up his hand, he saw his skin blister faintly. By now, even the light reflected by the moon was enough to hurt him slightly. "How odd," he whispered. By now, he should have adapted. His body was consistently growing stronger and more resistant to the burning effect of the light. And yet, he couldn't escape.

Even as he was still staring at his own skin, Zyl took Mercury's hand in his own, running a thumb with a slightly sharp nail across Mercury's wrist. "Does it hurt?" the dragon asked.

Mercury smiled faintly. "Not really?" he answered, though his tone was unsure. Zyl tilted his head, and with a small shrug, Mercury elaborated. "It's not really damaging to what I am, these days. I can just think the damaged pieces back, or assimilate more material. It's not...

bad, not really. But it hurts, yes. In a purely nervous-system based way, that <Babbling Brook> washes away.”

“You dislike it,” Zyl said. It wasn’t a question.

“Yeah,” Mercury nodded. “I dislike it. It’s uncomfortable. It’s weird and I don’t like that I feel... kinda powerless. Like I’m hiding from it. That’s frustrating.”

“Mhm,” Zyl hummed, looking at the sky. The moon hung there, silvery and calm. The dragon smiled. “Want me to bring down the sun for you?”

With a snicker, Mercury waved him off. “Please don’t,” the mopaaw said, smiling. “I like the sun. I just like it better when it’s not trying to burn me.”

At that, the dragon nodded, then let go of Mercury’s hand. They laid down on the rocky ground, side by side, the stones poking their back mattering so very little. These days, the ground would give before their skin did. Neither of them had anything to fear from sharp rocks.

For a long moment, both of them stared into the sky. Mercury had his eyes closed, feeling the light, dimmed by his veil, trying to burn away his eyelids. But, with a gentle sigh, he ignored it. So what if the sun was angry at him? He had better things to worry about.

Well, not quite *better*, but at the moment, he was more interested in learning more about cultivation than instantly running off to find the Skyflame Monastery. Plus, he could always ask the peak masters once he was done learning.

The burning had been getting worse, which sucked. Being hurt even during the night was new. Would he have to become a mole one of these days? Burrowing through the underground? Should he... make himself an evil lair?

Zyl elbowed his side. “Stop thinking about making an evil lair.”

Mercury blinked. “Did I say that out loud?”

“No,” Zyl smirked, “but it was written all over your face.”

“Dang. Well, there go my dreams of becoming a supervillain,” Mercury sighed softly. Then he smiled, turned on his side, and kissed Zyl on his cheek. “Thanks for coming along, love.”

The dragon smiled, then pinched Mercury's nose. "Of course," he said. "I'm happy to be tagging along."

Mercury laughed and gently slapped his hand aside. For a while, he just let himself enjoy the moment. Then, after a long, long while, he sat up, His hair fell into his face, just as the veil did, and he blew it aside. The wind picked up slightly.

Then, the little cannibal appeared by his side again. She was panting heavily, holding a small wicker basket. Inside, there were a few dozen glowing rocks. Mercury tilted his head as he looked at them. A couple pinged his <Magical Metallurgy>, though definitely more so the magical side rather than the metallurgy side.

"What are those?" he asked.

Pali smiled proudly, holding out the basket and letting it lightly smack against Mercury's chest. "Stones!" she said with a bright grin. When Mercury rolled his eyes, she just giggled, before continuing. "Valuable stones," she amended. "Ones that were hidden in treasuries. The deacons tried explaining, but I told them to just put sticky notes on the rocks."

"Right," Mercury said with a small snicker, then pulled out the first of the crystals. Calling them crystals was more accurate than rocks, he thought, since they were remarkably pure. The one he picked was long and sharp, featuring two points at the ends and a thicker midsection. He tilted its head at it, then pulled off the... sticky note. Huh.

Then, he read. "Spirit stone. These naturally occurring crystals contain qi, which can be absorbed by a cultivator to replenish their resources or help a breakthrough." Mercury blinked at the description, and even Zyl tilted his head. Tilting the pale white crystal in his hand, Mercury hummed. "Looks a lot like solid mana, doesn't it?"

"Definitely does," Zyl agreed.

"So eat it!" Pali said.

"..." Mercury paused, staring at the stone for a little while. Then, he sighed. "Appy, is this safe?"

[Confirmed. Would the individual like a complete analysis of the stone?]

"Yes, please."

[Spirit stone, high purity. Texture: Flaky, sharp. May leave small lacerations on the soft tissue of user's mouth, no danger of damaging teeth. Splinters are unlikely to be absorbed by <Nutritional Preservation>, however, once interfacing with the individual's energy body, likelihood of being quickly assimilated is greater than 80%. Impurities can be shedded via regular waste processing - ingestion has been determined safer than absorption due to user's unique body composition.]

"I feel like you're bullying me," Mercury said.

[I am, dum-dum.]

"That'll do it," Mercury sighed. Then, he read over the description again, and turned to Pali. Mournfully, he spoke. "I can eat it."

The girl's eyes brightened and she hastily nodded. "Do it!" she said. "Do it do it do it!!"

With another soft sigh and a slightly pensive expression, Mercury opened his mouth and snuck the crystal in underneath his veil. The spirit stone touched down on his tongue, the whole thing just barely fitting into his mouth without poking him too badly. For a moment, he just let it settle there, feeling his own mana start to boil and bubble a bit.

Actually, not his mana. His origin qi, now. It felt like it was frothing at the mouth, targeting the spirit stone. Mercury bit down once, and instantly, the crystal fell apart into a million tiny splinters, each one like a hair-thin toothpick in his mouth. A few stabbed into his gums, then instantly dissolved into energy that coursed right through his bloodstream

The kick from it was wild. He felt abuzz with energy all of a sudden, his entire body lighting up with electric power. It flooded his veins, and rapidly, all of that energy was being processed into raw power.

Processed. That was the odd thing, wasn't it? That his body seemingly just *knew* how to turn this unaspected qi into its own. He could feel the energy stream into his mana pool and his vessel, filling the two up. He hadn't yet forged a dantian, so there was nowhere else for the energy to go.

But he digested it. And that was rather odd.

Mercury focused. He tilted his head. The world slowed down.

"How does that work?" he asked.

His voice rang out against the world, against his own body, and he felt his cells vibrate like a struck gong. His teeth rattled in his mouth as <Answer> resonated with himself. A demand for an explanation that only he could fulfill.

So how did it work? The world told him.

Bit by bit, the process began to fall apart. The flaking spirit energies slowed. Mercury's ears began to ring, faintly, with the sound of distant bells. For a moment, reality drew into a thin strip. The world turned cold and dull, as if someone had dunked Mercury's head into an icy lake. Things felt too-far and blurry.

And then, the answer slammed into him all at once.

"Oh, well, that makes sense," Mercury whispered as he watched the energy fall apart, flaking into thin strings. Each of them wrapped around what was already there, sinking into his core. His own mana pried free piece after piece of the stone, in an almost reflexive maneuver.

An increased surface area then lead to quicker absorption. The qi would lose cohesion, and begin to split into its components, which his body could easily store. If he had a dantian, maybe it'd go directly there, but Mercury didn't yet. That was part of the Reforged-Realm. He'd get there.

For now, he just optimized picking the qi apart into its constituent pieces. Usually, the spirit stone might've just enhanced regeneration, but Mercury was pretty well versed in terms of mana absorption. Having eaten some solid mana before, it wasn't too much trouble to just... pull it into his core properly.

Increasing his internal pressure and all that.

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

Mercury breathed out some steam. There was a chalky powder left behind after he devoured the spirit stone. It'd increased his max mana and stamina by twenty each. He swallowed the stuff that was left over, the impurities, and very quickly felt <Nutritional Preservation> tear them apart. It tasted a little like plain flour. Which meant just kind of... dull.

He smiled just a little at the level. Hadn't <Bite> been a skill just for biting things? And now, it was adding energy processing as a feature... well, he didn't mind. This was fun, after all. He picked out another rock.

"Fire stone," he said. "Apparently meant to attune one's physique to fire, temporarily. Let's see."

He bit down on the rock.

This one tasted spicy, like eating a jalapeno pepper. His mouth instantly filled with heat, the kind that would usually drive tears to his eyes... but it was a little more comfortable. He felt the spiciness wash over his mouth, then his nose, then his eyes and spread further. A single bite spread it all throughout his body.

<Assimilate> whirred to life almost lazily, taking control of the heat. The temporary boon was instantly understood by the skill, and his body adjusted to permanently endure heat a bit better, but the oddest part was how it mixed with <Greater Perception>.

"I can see heat," Mercury noted.

"Oh?" Zyl asked, tilting his head.

Mercury looked at the dragon for a moment, then held up a hand, covering his eyes. "Oh, wow. Flashing lights warning, please, goodness."

Zyl snickered. "Whoops," the dragon said, unremorseful, and Mercury kept his eyelids shut as the immense heat within Zyl's chest slowly died down. Frigging dragons and the frigging stars in their chest.

Impatiently, Mercury waited for the fire effect to ebb, then pulled out another spirit stone. Pali was watching him gleefully, and when he took it into his mouth, and started absorbing the energy, she actually started obstructing him. "Hey!" she called. "Not like that! You have to chew properly to make the power pliable and have it spread properly! Or it'll clump up!"

Humming to himself, Mercury followed the advice. It was the oddest sensation to make his own mana match those movements of his jaw, a little like a half-passive usage of <Bite>. He just kind of coated his teeth in qi to properly massage the energies out of the stone. And it worked. It turned it even more efficient.

"Ah, so much of it is going to your stomach! That's all wrong, all wrong!" Pali chided. "You want to, uh, segment it up properly!"

She promptly demonstrated by taking a deep breath. Ambient qi flooded her lungs - or it should have. But in the back of her throat, Mercury saw the energy equivalent of a bunch of

buzzsaws. Whirring and churning streams of qi destroyed anything that came by, stripping it of cohesion and elemental affinity, allowing Pali to process it properly.

It wasn't that her breathing method was special - Mercury knew Gun-Byeong had plenty of unique ways to breathe, for example - but instead, the way she treated everything that went into her was special. She'd starved for so long that she'd learnt to almost instinctually make the absolute best from anything she inhaled.

By now, to her, it seemed almost effortless. Her technique had a ton of steps, each one just... ingrained into how Pali lived. When she breathed, she pulled qi from the air. When she ate meat, she drew out vitality, life force, every scrap of nutrients, and part of the residual memories in that flesh. When she drank water, that got processed, too.

Mercury tilted his head and watched the little eating machine work her way through another piece of candy he gave it. The way that she completely shredded it and took every single valuable scrap from it.

[<Nutritional Preservation> has levelled up! <Nutritional Preservation 7 -> 8>]

And as she smiled brightly at him he watched and thought.

Yeah. Yeah, he could work with this.