

Chapter 284: Becoming a Cultivator

Sitting in a lotus position, Mercury breathed in, then out.

“Alright,” he said. “What now?”

It had been a handful of days since he started living with the Cult of Infernal Flames. There was a lot that needed to be done in the Valley of Balance, and Mercury took care of much of it.

A well had dried up? He fixed it. Broken buildings? He fixed them. Wounds, aching backs, sick children? Fixed.

Fixed, fixed, fixed. Like a spring storm, Mercury tore through the abandoned valley and solved every problem he encountered. One by one, people improved and thanked him. And every single time, he just nodded underneath his veil, and collected the meagre contribution points those disaster lesbians would give him for it.

They also complained about him taking up too much of their time, always. And yet, he helped. His favourite project, by far, was farming, though. Mainly because he could interact with Zyl.

They’d combed through fields hand in hand. The dragon dragged his hands through the soil, judging nutrient quality and hydration, and Mercury would reshape things. Ask the world to reshape itself, feed it from <Truth> and <Grain of Infinity>, and the earth would come up from below. New nutrients emerged, grasses were mulched to become nitrogen for the soil, and channels appeared as if dug by ghostly hands.

They planted grains and squashes, mostly. Filling things to feed many people. He’d made farming implements, he’d created the conditions for people to thrive without him, and he felt satisfied with that. So now, he was to learn.

“Every cultivator begins in the Rusted-realm,” Gun-Byeong said slowly. “It is about recognizing the shackles of your body, and shaking them off. You understand your weaknesses, and you chip away at them. Before you can be remade, you must have a suitable base. This realm is for establishing it.”

Mercury nodded along to the explanation. It was, essentially, the preparation for forging. Stripping away the rust. “How do I go about that?”

Gun-Byeong frowned faintly, as if this was beneath him, then sighed. “You create qi by mixing your mana and stamina,” he said. “Then you floor your physical and energy body to bring them into synchronicity.”

Hm. That felt... inconvenient. Mercury had <Mana Veins>, of course, which were his energy body, effectively. But those far, far eclipsed his physical body in vastness. He frowned faintly, but Gun-Byeong shook his head, reading his expression. “No,” the beastly man said impatiently, “that is not it. They need not overlap. They need to *synchronize*. Be part of you. Become linked, not the same.”

Tilting his head, Mercury decided to just give it his best shot. Cultivation was new to him, so of course, he was going to run into some trouble. It was almost inevitable. Especially with his achievements in magic and physique. So, he decided to bear with him.

Following the cryptic advice, he breathed in and out. They’d made him read a technique manual first, an ordinary, plain technique, standard for cult members. He had dozens of those, stolen from the sect archives he’d raided just a page or two ago. All of them should have been easy, they were the very beginnings of cultivation, after all.

One would think that beginning with a heavenly foundation would be best, but that was wrong. Building a heavenly foundation was a pipe dream. One had to start from an ordinary one, then expand that foundation bit by bit. The Rusted Realm was full of malleability, so it was easy to experiment.

And if Mercury couldn’t even understand an ordinary technique, then a heavenly one was far from his reach. But that was fine. He settled into the rhythm. Breathe in, then out. The familiar motion was relieving for him, easing the burden that weighed so heavily on his shoulders.

He followed the motion in the manual. It was full of flowery words and indistinct language, but in the end, there was still something simple to it. Take stamina from one’s well, mana from one’s core, and weave them together into qi.

The pattern for it was difficult, since the two didn’t like following the same paths. Stamina ebbed and flowed like waves, filling his body evenly. Mana went along like blood, thrumming in tune with his heartbeat, moving through its own set of veins.

... That was probably what Gun-Byeong meant with synchronicity, then. Managing to fuse his mana and stamina.

Mercury was far more practiced with one of those forces over the other, of course, so that's where he started. Mana. It was something he had very extensively practiced with, and where he had once had a tiny puddle of it, barely a few drops, by now he had a steadily refilling lake, backed by an infinity engine.

Suffice to say, he had more than enough mana to fill up his body. He flooded his veins, mana pouring through his body for the first time in a while. His limbs shook off their rust, the tiny imperfections in the veins smoothing themselves out. Mercury felt himself grow stronger - and then remembered that he wasn't in a mopaaw's body anymore.

His mana veins, however, hadn't changed.

They were still the same strange network, mapping out something almost feline, then expanding past it. Expanding his mana aura, where he felt things so distinctly. Right now, his body and veins didn't match at all, and yet, the reinforcement worked. When he flooded his front paws with mana, he felt his hands strengthen. His hind paws mapped to his feet.

'Is it... intent?' he thought, creasing his brows. Mercury focused, and ihn'ar washed over him almost naturally. Like a blanket embracing him. His focus grew immense, and Gun-Byeong blinked as the atmosphere shifted.

Mercury didn't pay that any mind, though. His attention was turned inwards. His mana flowed through that network that was him, and it strengthened him. There were veins for a tail, even though he had none, which gave a strange sensation. But he also had veins that simply mapped past him.

So, the missing "tail" wasn't so different from those, he supposed. All just part of him that wasn't currently there.

That thought sent a pulse through his body. He tilted his head. His stamina spilled forward, outward, and brushed against the edge of his body. It gathered there, like a building wave, then slowly trickled back. Mercury furrowed more, focused more, and followed that sensation.

A part of him that wasn't there.

Stamina brushed against the edge of his body and pushed. He felt his skin strain. There was a soft, pushing, almost tearing sensation, and then warmth spread over him.

“You just exploded,” Gun-Byeong provided helpfully.

Ah. The warmth was probably his own blood, then. His skin was flayed open, tears criss-crossing it as if exposing his fault-lines. He sighed, mended his skin, then tried again. Apparently, brute-force wasn’t the solution.

In a quick moment, faster than a blink, he reviewed the entire contents of the manual again. The *Rust-Shedding Flame Cleansing Technique*. What a mouthful.

Skimming it, he reviews bits. Blah blah, cleansing fire, blah blah, shed mortal impurities, blah blah, your body is a vessel and your power goes beyond it. Ah, that must be it. Seeing his body as just a vessel... what would using his stamina outside of it mean, then? Tempering himself beyond it?

Wait, that was easy to figure out. For most cultivators, it was probably manifesting techniques, since their stamina and mana were the same. Mercury just had to go at it the other way around. He needed to get his stamina outside his body to make qi, rather than get his qi outside his body once he already made it.

But he had a reference for that, too. Smiling softly, Mercury simply turned to his boyfriend. “Hey, Zyl?”

The dragon looked over, saw the blood already washing off Mercury, and snickered. “Let me guess, you tried getting your stamina out and hurt yourself, and now you want advice?”

“Yep,” Mercury said with a smile.

Zyl sighed dramatically, dragging a hand through his hair, and giving Mercury a smug grin. “Fine, but only because I like you so much. Getting your stamina outside usually manifests as some kind of damage expansion. Think of it as air pressure. You punch, and blow apart a mountain. Like this.”

With an almost lazy motion, Zyl swung his hand. He just waved it through the empty air, and yet, with a boom, the ground in front of him split. Five long, jagged claw marks dug themselves through the dirt, and the wind made his hair flutter.

“So fucking handsome,” Mercury muttered with a grin, then shook off the thought. “Thanks, Zyl,” he said more loudly, then nodded. Pressure and killing intent. He could work with that.

If all he needed was to cause trouble, then couldn't he just...

Mercury felt his perspective shift as he focused. Stamina flooded outside of him, filling his ghostly hands, his intent, and his rijn. All of those were expansions of himself that interacted with the world. And, from those invisible attachments, it was easy to bring his stamina to bear further.

With a gentle tilt of his head, a ghostly hand gave a wave, and his stamina carried the motion. He left a human-sized handprint in the grass, pressing a few strands of it down against the ground. "Got it," Mercury said with a hum.

[You have acquired the ability <Stamina Expansion lv. 1> through a specific action!]

And then, with a twist and a thought, twirling his mana and stamina into one was easy.

[<Mana Expansion> and <Stamina Expansion> have fused into <Qi lv. 1>]

The two energies braided into each other, then became something different entirely. Mercury felt it. Blue and green twisted together to make... cyan. That was the colour of qi - this kind of unaspected qi, at least. It was a bright cyan, like one might find on neon signs.

"Alright, I've got qi," Mercury said plainly. In fact, he felt it resonate in his chest. Thrumming.

What an odd sensation. Like his heartbeat wanted to join it. He tilted his head. Could he?

He'd expanded his mana and stamina, all that was left was his health. He'd never consciously controlled it, but surely, it couldn't be that hard...?

Mercury tried. For a moment, his heart spasmed - then exploded in his chest. "Huh," he said. "So that's not very cool." With a quick revolution of his mind, he spun up <Resolution>, and wove himself a new heart from stored up biomatter. It took all of five minutes to restore.

Then he tried again, and his liver turned to blood pulp. On the third attempt, his lungs evaporated, which ended in him wheezing and coughing blood for a little while. Mercury frowned a bit at the problems he was encountering.

"Hey, Gun-Byeong?"

"Hm?"

"I'm trying to manipulate my health and keep pulping my organs."

The beastly man flinched at the words, then stared at Mercury, narrowing his eyes. "What in the seven hells is wrong with you?"

Mercury shrugged. "It's not like it's too much of a bother. Hearts are like, so 2000s, you know?" he asked.

Gun-Byeong blinked. "What. What does a random number have to do with this? Did you pulp your brain?"

"Oh, that wouldn't stop me, either. You literally saw me make myself a new head."

Even the Beast shivered at that. "Don't remind me," he said with a shake of his head.

"Anyway. Controlling health is something best not attempted. It's too easy to die - and the secret to origin qi."

"Huh, neat." Mercury nodded. Then, he smiled. "Got it," he said.

"What do you mean you *got it*?"

[<Qi> and <Health Expansion> have fused into <Origin Qi lv. 1>]

[<Origin Qi lv. 1> has forcefully fused <Mana Veins>, <Stamina Guide>, <Stamina Vessel>, <Warmed Up>.]

[You have acquired the Ability <Internal Energy lv. 2>]

He smiled, then brought his new energy to bear. Unlike before, his new *origin qi* was pure white. A fusion of all three things. What did health and stamina make? Or health and mana, he wondered? Could he still make those things?

The answer, as it turned out, was yes.

[<Internal Energy> has levelled up! <Internal Energy lv. 2 -> 3>]

With a simple twist of his mind, his origin qi came apart, unravelling into all its components. It was malleable, and easy to harness, entirely unlike what he was told. Smiling softly, Mercury played around with its constituent energies.

Health and stamina, for example, fused into something that mercury dubbed *aura*. It was exceptionally good at healing and physically enhancing him, but other than doing more of what he could already do, it was useless. No magic, no elements, simply a raw physical enhancement.

Mana and health instead turned into what he dubbed *spirit*. He could feel it bubbling, almost alive, and wanting to change the world. Almost with ease, it made things move, had other things to his bidding. It could make a rock want to roll down a hill, a blade of grass want to wrap around something else.

And it was not unlike asking the world to do something. Almost perfect for druidics, he thought. Smiling softly to himself, he finally turned to Gun-Byeong again. The peak master sat there and stared at Mercury with his mouth open.

“How are you not dead?” he asked, voice barely a whisper.

Mercury shrugged, and smiled smugly. “I’m very, very hard to kill.”

Pure white origin qi flowed through his energy body with ease. It suffused each of his cells, along invisible veins, and easily went past his body, too. It flowed across the world, feeding details back to him. Gun-Byeong shivered. “A... divine sense. Already?”

“What’s a divine sense?” Mercury asked innocently.

Still wearing an expression of shock, Gun-Byeong gathered himself and moved. His own qi pulsed out of his dantian, flowing into the world. Mercury felt, rather than saw, the ethereal power pushing against his own. Giving him a measure of Gun-Byeong’s power. And he tilted his head.

“You have a lot of qi,” Mercury noted. His own total pool was smaller than that of the brute. Of course, that wasn’t much of an obstacle when...

[<Grain of Infinity> resonates with <Origin Qi>]

[<Grain of Infinity> spins and grows.]

That was all it said, but Mercury knew what it meant. The little white hole that laid at the core of his being, that beat in tune with his heart, was ready to spew out an absolute torrent of origin qi if he needed it. And he would need it.

Because, apparently, origin qi didn’t regenerate. It had to be manually threaded each time. That was where Gun-Byeong’s unique technique to cultivate more and more of it came into play - he could use it without expending it, technically, internally. So he could build more.

Other cultivators might burn themselves out, or annihilate their own organs and blood essence and what have you if they used too much. But Mercury found that he could just...

make more. Perhaps because of his inner world, or some combination of factors. Regardless, he could regenerate his origin qi.

“Preposterous,” Gun-Byeong breathed. “You will die if you use it up.”

Mercury smiled at that. Then, he shook his head. “One day you’ll learn to just believe me. The next part of the Rusted-realm is coursing qi through my body, right? Clearing away impurities? Using my power to cleanse myself?”

The master of Slaughter swallowed drily. “Yes,” he said, knowing what would come. “That’s... correct.”

Slowly, Mercury’s smile widened. His minds spun up, blossomed, grew. The world slowed down, and he experienced so much of it. He felt himself thrive, as if his spirit were being watered by the vision. By the new energies he felt, the new way he interacted with the world. In a single, violent sweep, Mercury let his origin qi outside.

A bright white tide spilled out of him. Gun-Byeong covered his eyes just in time. The wave of light passed over him, travelling outwards as a faint shockwave. Grasses bent, rocks quivered, and it spilled across the entire nearby peak, and then further. It must have spilled into other peaks too.

By the end of it, Mercury laughed.

He was a dried out, dying husk on the ground. His blood had evaporated, every point of health he had fed into his origin qi. His mana was gone. Stamina empty. It was all completely removed, and without a drip to feed him, he couldn’t regenerate.

But he had seen so much. All at once, he knew he had grown.

[<Mindbloom> has levelled up. <Mindbloom lv. 1 -> 2>]

And then, with his newly grown mind, he activated <Grain of Infinity>. Power spilled out of that ethereal place, a torrent of it filling his muscles. Fibres that had been dried out and reduced to pale husks were flooded with strength. His mummified body grew stronger in a moment, a faint sheen of power coalescing over his skin.

Horror spread across Gun-Byeong’s features at the implications. Mercury was breathing in seconds, and a single minute later, he sat back up. Blinding white origin qi roared through his body, through his cells, his veins, his muscles, his bones. He felt himself shift at the sheer proximity to that power, felt the impurities flake away.

They spilled from his pores, and moments later, were annihilated by <Rainfall>. His body was poorly made, he found. He could be so much more, go so much further. He'd taken so many steps, yet he'd never found these impurities, because they were... almost baked into him. Little inefficiencies he had considered natural.

His body was turned from a copper cable to a superconductor, when it came to mana. In an instant, his origin qi roared through him. It burnt parts of his body, the rampaging power struggling against his control, but he just laughed. He healed, and his mind grabbed onto the streaks of lightning that sought to spill outwards.

[The basic efficacy of your stats has increased by 10%]

Instantly, he dragged them all back in. He breathed. Then he smiled, and opened his eyes, the already horrible depths in them having grown a little bit deeper. "I think," he said quietly, "I'm done with the Rusted-Realm. What's next?"

Only then did he realize that suddenly, a few more peak masters had appeared to take a look at this anomaly. And one of them was especially odd.

"Palisade-girl," Mercury said with a calm voice, "you have to stop trying to eat my arm."

"Never!"