

Chapter 288: Cut Off

“How should I mutilate you?”

That was the question Mercury was facing. He had come a long way to get to this point. Cultivation was a little odd, he thought, but also surprisingly intuitive. He'd needed to change a few things about his body, learn a couple new tricks. But now, giving up pieces of it...

“What will I learn from this?” Mercury asked with a tilt of his head.

Su ShouFan smiled, though it was without warmth. It was a knowing smile, instead. “There is a reforging technique that some of the disciples on this Peak use. To remake pieces of the body that aren't there. I intend to teach it to you - the process is faster and more efficient based on how much you lose.”

Mercury thought those words over. How much he lost. Well, there was only really one answer to that, wasn't there? If someone asked him what he would give for a single answer, to learn another new detail, especially in a setting that felt... if not perfectly safe then at least reasonably so.

He smiled, the motion tinged with just a bit of insanity. “Then, peak master Su, you can feel free to ruin anything you can imagine about me.”

The woman furrowed her brows. “Art thou sure?”

“I can survive a little suffering,” he said with a shrug.

Very slowly, Su ShouFan nodded. She drew in a breath, and when it left her lips again, the air turned frigid. From a sheath at her side, she drew a long dagger. It was almost the size of a smallsword, and it shone with a faint glow. “This,” the woman took to explaining as she slowly moved the dagger through the air, “is the thousand-year Ice Fang. The cold is meant to be hellish.”

Nodding along with the explanation, Mercury looked at the knife. It looked rather cold indeed. But still, he didn't change his mind. “Alright, feel free to cut me.”

Su ShouFan looked at him once more, then nodded. The dagger slashed through the air and met Mercury's skin. In a single, smooth line, it cut through him.

The sensation was odd. His muscles froze so quickly, he barely felt any pain. Instead, there was just a strange sense of loss and cold. "It interferes with healing," Su ShouFan explained. "To make sure that the injuries stick around on people like you."

Mercury nodded absently. "Of course," he agreed. He looked over to his side where his arm had been, and yet, only the stump of a shoulder remained. How odd.

"You still wish to continue?" Su ShouFan asked, frozen blood falling from her dagger in thin chips, like flowerpetals.

"I do," Mercury said.

Metal flashed, and another limb hit the ground. Mercury's other arm fell softly. Again, she asked and he answered, and Mercury lost a leg, then another. Then, he agreed to lose more. She cut his eyes, then his ears, the cold popping his eardrums and turning the world entirely silent.

He couldn't see anymore. Couldn't hear the comforting whistle of the wind, couldn't see the waterfalls crashing down the Peak of Mutilation. And yet, he said a simple word. "Continue."

The dagger entered his throat next, and the cold stole his voice. He fell silent as ice sprouted inside his vocal tract. He couldn't breathe anymore, either, but <Rainfall> made short work of that need. Stiffly, his muscles freezing from the cold, Mercury nodded. As if to ask her to go on.

Another stab reached his inside. This time, it pierced his mouth. His tongue froze, and all sensation of taste disappeared. Still more. The dagger entered his lungs, freezing the air in his chest.

That was, perhaps, the worst of it all. Not breathing. Did Mercury need to breathe? He didn't rightly know anymore, but this was a test, and he found that the habit of breathing was hard to get rid off. When his lungs refused to inflate, he almost began to struggle. But he beat down that impulse with some effort, his conscious mind wrestling it to the ground.

Mercury didn't take a breath, but he still asked to continue. His liver, his kidneys, each one was frozen one by one. The lower part of his torso was cut away. Then, finally, there were only two more organs he had left, his heart and his brain.

There was a pause before the knife came again, and Mercury almost tilted his head. He was so curious. Was Su ShouFan afraid of hurting him? Had Zyl stopped her? He didn't know,

even his mana slow and clunky in this darkness he found himself in. But he waited, patiently, until another blow came.

Inch by inch, the dagger sank into his heart.

The warm, steady beat he could feel in his chest ebbed. It came slower, colder, beat by beat, until it beat no longer. His heart stood still as a block of ice in his chest. Mercury felt a shiver go through his mind. Alarm bells rang all throughout his body. He was dying, he was dying.

But he remained alive. Even with a frozen heart, his body moved. His frozen lips, pale from the cold, formed into a smile, even as his skin cracked. He nodded once more. A second ticked by, then another, and the dagger sank into his head.

A piercing cold piece of metal. Mercury felt it dig into his forehead, splitting the bone of his skull, and slowly piercing into his brain. Cold spread outwards in a place where he shouldn't even feel it. He felt it all shut down, one by one, moment by moment.

Before, he'd felt a dull absence from his limbs, blaring warning signals, a worry that doom was impending. But without his brain, that all disappeared. It was a lot more like losing his senses than his limbs. The world went from an uproar of danger to... a fading quiet. Distant, of no concern.

How odd. Mercury could hear his own thoughts, still. Losing his brain did definitely have consequences, though. He could tell that his mental capacity was lessened. Though, not overly much.

After all, he could already split himself into five equally strong minds. His brain could, at best, keep up with less than even one of those. But it was a bit disorienting, floating... somewhere in space that he really had little conception of.

Except, there were things he could use to orient himself. Namely, there was a good bit of "himself" out there. <Voidwalker> was surprisingly helpful, too. His mana could also reach outward.

But much more than anything internal, there was a single external guiding beacon, reaching out to him like an offered hand. There was a sun, yes, but it was distant and hostile. He could feel it trying to burn parts of him away. No, the heat he felt was far closer than that.

Right next to him, even. There was a spark of a flame. A spark of a wildfire. A spark of a star.

Mercury 'turned', for all that that word was worthless in this space, and he 'smiled' as he faced the heat. An extended hand, filled with unabashed heat. The kind of warmth that came from a home, from a hearth, from belonging. The mopaaw didn't have hands, but he still reached out for it, and met it easily.

He didn't hear what Zyl said, but at the very least, it served as an anchor. Mercury could think himself into existence, now. He could have simply <Resolved> himself, and spun a new body from thought alone. He could even have <Assimilated> pieces of heat and air and rebuilt from that.

But he didn't.

Instead, he triggered <Bet>.

[<Bet> initiating. Calculating parameters. Comparing skillset to task. Eliminating impossibilities. Determining likelihood of success.]

[Calculations complete. Choose difficulty level: -1-2-3-4-5-]

Mercury thought. He didn't have a brain, not properly, so he couldn't articulate those thoughts as well as he usually would, but he still did. He communicated, in some way, though it was primitive.

[Difficulty selected. Generating conditions.]

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[Bet: -4-

Condition: Reach intermediate mastery in a Reforging-Art of your choosing.

Reward: <Tempered Body> mastery, <Heightened Mana Regeneration> mastery, <Mindbloom> mastery, Reforging affinity pass, <Shop> mastery.

Restrictions: <Resolution> has been disabled. <Assimilate> has been disabled. <Unravel> has been disabled. <Lucidity> has been disabled. <Multitasking> has been disabled. <Mindbloom> has been disabled. <Dream Manifestation> has been disabled.

Penalty: -500 Skill Points]

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Mercury looked at the notification - which, again, was a very generous phrasing. He didn't see it so much as he intuited it. Appy was still with him, after all, even if he was strongly limited by this quest. Even with all of that, he went one step further.

<Training Weights> activated, and reduced his Skills even more. Everything about him was weakened. His mind already felt slow and sluggish, now he felt downright mortal. It was an odd sensation, but grounding.

The world felt so distant and small, like he was an observer again. When he was strong, everything felt open and easy - he could go anywhere, be anyone, do almost anything he wished. And now, he was like this. He was nothing but a bundle of his own thoughts, barely able to interact, to see or to move, and with the tools to simply regenerate taken away.

How would he live like this? That was a strange, but important question. How would he live? He couldn't exactly *move*, unless he could will himself forward? He had managed to grab onto Zyl's warmth, so maybe...

With an invisible force, Mercury tried his best to move. There were a few ways he could still perceive the world - though all of them were increasingly inhuman. First, there was his origin qi. That wasn't stored in his body, not really, so he still had access to it. He could even still scan the world with his mana, which made <Greater Perception> kick in, only to be promptly smothered by <Training Weights>.

But it did work. He would feel the ground in front of him for about a meter or so. A little bit like using a cane to feel the ground. It was clumsy, and he wasn't used to relying on it, but it worked.

His other option was <Tapestry>. He could very distinctly feel Zyl's presence, the two of them were connected through a rather thick thread after all. Given that they'd lived together for a long while, it wasn't particularly surprising. Still, that wasn't exactly something easy for Mercury to grab hold of... or was it?

Despite the suspected idiocy of the task, Mercury tried to grab onto the <Tapestry> instead of moving himself. <Itinerant> and <Voidwalker> both flared to life. He had done something similar before - teleporting through his connection to someone or something, but this was a bit different.

He wasn't trying to just appear by Zyl's side, but to reach him slowly. Bringing the glowing wisp that remained of his consciousness along, like pulling himself up a rope. The <Grain of Infinity> hummed in his chest, and he felt his <Truth> roar.

After all, the <Truth> was that Mercury was someone without limits. Someone who was free. So what if he didn't have legs to walk on? He'd just find a workaround. Tools that he could use to get where he wanted to go, anyway. And right now, he wanted to go be with his boyfriend.

A blink passed, and Mercury moved. Somehow, weirdly, he managed to pull himself forward in space. And land on Zyl's shoulder.

He couldn't hear the dragon, but he could faintly feel the warmth beneath him shaking. Was Zyl... laughing? Mercury extended his mana outwards, tracing the dragon's lips. They moved, because of course they did, but Mercury couldn't tell what he was saying. It's not like he was practiced at intuiting random lip movements that he only felt through his mana into words.

Hm. How was he meant to talk like this? He *had* been able to ask Bael, Marcel and Kaga to come visit him here through <Tapestry>, to be fair... and <Truth> did let him broadcast things to some degree... Usually, he might've just used <Dream Manifestation>, but that one was sealed away.

Even as Mercury was thinking things over, a voice reached his mind.

'You're alive?' it asked.

Mercury wanted to hum in thought, but he didn't exactly have a voice box to hum with. Nor did he really feel a strong need to communicate in words. So what he sent instead was a loose affirmative, one that seemed to surprise the other person.

It was oddly familiar, talking like this. He could read the surface thoughts and feelings of the thing he was speaking to. Well, thing was probably objectifying quite a bit. He was rather sure it was Su ShouFan, after all. She seemed surprised and confused at his condition.

'How are you alive?' she asked.

'I dunno,' Mercury provided unhelpfully.

Su ShouFan might have blinked at him. Mercury didn't know - it's not like he could see her, and even if he could, she wore a blindfold. He did, however, read her absolute confusion over their connection. 'You... don't know?'

'Yep.'

The peak master seemingly didn't have a good reply to that, and Mercur felt Zyl laugh again. The dragon seemed to be thoroughly enjoying his shenanigans. He probably spoke, too, but Mercury couldn't hear him.

'How are you talking to me?' Mercury asked.

Instantly, he read a bit of hesitation from peak master Su. It was as if the woman didn't quite want to tell him how she could speak with him. Was it some sort of secret? If it was, then that was quite troublesome, since Mercury really wanted to know.

In the end, though, he didn't need to ask again, nor trigger <Answer>. He didn't want to pull the truth out of anyone, even if he was really, really curious. Instead, ShouFan simply answered of her own volition. 'It's a technique that I inherited. I don't like teaching it since its main function isn't telepathy.'

'What is its main function?'

'Mutilation,' the woman replied.

Ah. Mercury could definitely see how that was troublesome. If it was an attack aimed at more or less permanently injuring the mind of an opponent, then that was reasonably dangerous, even to him. After all, right now he was nothing but his mind. If she decided to cut that part of him down, then that would be rather troublesome indeed.

He definitely didn't have that kind of trust for the woman - and she didn't exactly want to teach him, because she didn't have that kind of trust for him. How amusing. That's how knowledge ended up hoarded, didn't it? Because other people were deemed unfit for it...

Mercury tried shaking his head, then remembered he didn't have one. Instead, he sent the mental equivalent of a nod over. 'Understandable, you don't have to teach me.'

'I will, though,' Su ShouFan said to his surprise. 'Communication is the most important part of living. People - human or not - are social creatures. None of us survive on our own.'

Hm. That wasn't something he entirely agreed with. The surviving on one's own part, at least. Mercury was plenty capable of surviving on his own these days, mainly because he kind of was divorced from most regular person needs. Like food, water, or sleep.

Still, he did generally enjoy his time with other people. There was a good reason Mercury kept heading back to stormbreaker, or picking other people up in his travels. He had a bit of a habit of trying to solve the problems of anyone who asked him reasonably nicely.

In any case, regardless of whether he needed to communicate, he certainly wanted to. Speaking was cool. How would he profess his undying love for Zyl if he couldn't talk with him? Truly, that would be a terrible fate.

'I look forward to learning, then,' he simply replied.

Su ShouFan had probably noticed him going through a whole spectrum of thoughts, but if she did, the woman didn't comment on them. Instead, she just mind-nodded. 'We'll work on getting you communicating, moving, and somehow perceiving your surroundings, first. Then we can see about anything else.'

'Sounds good to me,' Mercury confirmed cheerily. He truly didn't feel too bothered by his current state. Odd as it was, it wasn't painful. He still felt like himself, and while things were scary, he had done scary before. Taking another leap in the dark wasn't too bad.

'Let me show you around the mountain, then,' Su ShouFan said. Mercury noticed her lips moving, sensing as much with his mana, but he couldn't tell what was being said. Most likely, she was just talking to Zyl, telling him what she needed him to do. Right now, Mercury was mostly hitching a ride on the dragon's shoulder, so he was basically his wheelchair.

If Mercury could have telepathically spoken with his boyfriend, maybe he would have said something like 'stride forth my mighty steed', but he couldn't, so he was tragically resigned to being a silent presence on the dragon's shoulder. He did manage to anchor himself to Zyl though, using <Tapestry> to 'lock' the distance they had from each other. Which meant he was mostly pulled along like a helium balloon on a very short rope.

Had someone asked, Mercury wouldn't have called it the most dignified mode of transportation he'd ever used, but it was certainly one of the funniest. Zyl also felt warm to the touch, so it appealed to his feline instincts of lying in a specifically warm beam of sunlight for a long while.

And so, Su ShouFan began to show him around the Peak of Mutilation.

It was a bit odd, since the guided tour was mostly focused on accessibility. There were a lot of people Mercury caught smiling and waving, whenever his mana reached far enough to spot them, but a lot of effort was spent on just showing him the paths. Learning to use his mana as a guide, and following along with Zyl whenever they needed to head off somewhere else.

Su ShouFan showed him a place for them to stay, a place for them to get food, and where they would be working, to the best of their ability. Zyl was looking forward to working on a bit of farming, Mercury could tell. With how much the dragon had gotten into gardening, he could see the appeal of this as well.

Mercury would apparently also be doing a lot of cultivating, but many of the techniques he was to learn actually benefitted from living a somewhat regular life. Apparently, holing up in a cave and absorbing qi could only do so much, and to find enlightenment, you had to actually live a little. How strange!

Their house was one made from sturdy wood, built on a small platform, with half the house hanging over the cliffside, and being propped up by more beams of wood driven into the side of the mountain. It was smaller than their place in Stormbraver, but it had all the amenities they needed, for the most part.

There wasn't a kitchen, which was a little sad, since Mercury did like cooking. But they would live, most likely. It did have a small cultivation space, both in the attic and in an adjacent cave, where Su ShouFan promised to meet him the next morning. For now, after a short tour, where Zyl was introduced to some staff, and Mercury kind of floated around.

It was a bit exhausting to float around with Zyl. Especially with <Mindbloom> sealed, Mercury could tell that he was getting tired faster than usual. Oh. He might even need to sleep again? That was an odd thought.

Actively keeping up <Tapestry> was definitely draining on his mind, though, so when they arrived at home, Mercury stopped holding the connection in place. He had a faint... not headache, since he didn't have a head. But he could feel a bit of strain settling in on him.

Zyl asked something, but Mercury couldn't tell what. He just knew that the dragon worried, since he felt as much through their connection. But he couldn't really reply, either. It was frustrating. Mercury triggered <Force of the Hecatoncheires> but he had to push against <Training Weights>. Even then, there was nothing to even write with in the house.

Frustrating, too. So, with nothing to do, Mercury just kind of hovered in the air. He wondered, for a moment, if Zyl could even see him, or if the dragon needed some sort of magical detection. Did he look like a floating orb of light? Or was he entirely invisible?

It wasn't like he had a way to check, really. Appy?

[The individual is entirely invisible to conventional sight, but emits faint infrared radiation.]

Huh. So some animals would be able to see him, and most powerful things, too. But he didn't exactly emit a lot of it... he'd warm people up, he guessed? Truly, incredible powers. Well, he could probably make some iguana friends, at least. This mountain seemed suitable to have some lizards, outside of Zyl.

For his own part, the dragon seemed to be enjoying Mercury's warmth. Whenever the mopaaw's mana flickered out far enough - mana expansion was a little inconsistent like that - he could feel that Zyl was looking over at him with a hint of worry. Not always, just every few seconds or minutes, checking on him.

The dragon spoke, but there was no reply. Mercury didn't know what he said, after all. Eventually, Juno emerged from his shadow, settling in with Zyl, too. It was saddening, seeing two people he liked try so hard to talk to him. Juno even tried to write with the shadows, but with his mana-sight being inconsistent, Mercury couldn't quite make out the letters.

Braille? Maybe he could have read braille. It was odd, but for now, he was kind of cut off.

Resigning himself to this existence, he decided to just float. He mentally closed his eyes and waited for a little bit. Until, finally, in the middle of the night, the world changed.

'Are you ready for your first lesson?' Su ShouFan asked.

At the start of the day, Mercury would have said the he didn't mind, but by now, he was more than a little excited for it.