

Chapter 268: Sometimes we Suffer

[Evolutionary Fusion confirmed. Engaging. Please pick an option to evolve the Skill into. The price will be the same (1100 Skill points), no matter which you choose.]

[1. <Steel Spider>

2. <Carve>

3. <Reap>]

[<Steel Spider>: Your web is magnificent, and you weave it from metal. Each of your threads is thin enough to slice through blood and bone, and the individual's control over it is impeccable. Ensnare your enemies and cut them to ribbons.]

He regarded the evolution with a tilt of his head. It was very cool, Mercury noted, but it was also rather simple.

[<Carve>: The individual treats cutting less as violent and more of an art. To sever is the same as to weave. That does not make it any less lethal - this Skill allows the user to draw an inescapable cage of iron, but takes the idea of cutting into the realm of creation. Weave your violence into an artwork, and follow the thread to a designated target. Nothing is out of reach.]

This one sounded far more like him. To take cutting and turn it into creation appealed to him. And he enjoyed the idea of using it in different contexts as well. <Sever> had been a little too volatile to use on cake, for example, but this probably wouldn't be. He liked it.

[<Reap>: All life is fragile. See the thin thread that people hang onto, see their thin veneer of existence, and cut it. The user gains the ability to draw other's life out into strings, and draw those strings into their web. Cut them, reap them, weave them, until all of life is your web and nothing remains.]

His final option sounded very cool, but also very edgy. It was also kind of something he could already do, if he combined <Unravel> and <Dreamweave> and the Dream of Starvation. Also, it was so focused on murder, which felt a little, well, pedestrian? He didn't really want to kill people anymore.

No, <Reap> wasn't for him. With a gentle breath, Mercury chose <Carve>.

[The individual has acquired the Skill <Carve lv. 1> through Evolutionary Fusion!]

Instantly, the change washed over him. Two Skills became one - but their individual effects still remained. Mercury was perfectly capable of creating mundane threads, spun like spider silk. But now, the world was different.

When he activated <Carve>, everything turned into lines. It was a fundamental thing, a designation that said that everything could be cut. Not just *cut*, though, but *carved*. Shaped, and improved via removal.

Everything was connected. The whole world was a place to create things that were meant to be enjoyed. And all of it could be cut into shape. Sometimes, connections were unnecessary and needed to be trimmed. Sometimes, they needed to be traced and changed.

Mercury could see it all sprawl out in front of him in something that was faintly reminiscent of his <Tapestry> yet ever so different. It was something he could *build*, too. He traced one of the strings that he could see with his Skills active, and then <Carved>.

It fell apart. A connection severed. It was one that wasn't big or noticeable, just a connection between two rocks that had laid particularly close, and now tumbled away from each other. But he could see it all unwrap before him.

Looking hurt, just a little. And there was no one right way for him to do things. The world was like a block of marble, ready to have a statue carved out of it. These places more so than anything else.

Realms of sin. They were malformed, rotting wounds on the world. He saw them as blocks of wood, full of knots and burls. There were streaks of decay, infestation and rot. But despite all that, he could see that there was something hiding underneath.

Rot formed a pattern, decay drew lines of bright and dark into the world. He looked at it, and activated his skill for the first time. The world shook, and Mercury <Carved>. Festering decay was removed, cut aside in long flakes of world-matter, dissolving into strings that fed Mercury's dream.

The chaff was repurposed and remade. Taken apart until none of its essence remained, returned to primordial building blocks. But what remained of the realm was... cleaner. Less horrid. Less suffering. Mercury breathed.

Once again, he <Carved>.

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Time flew. Flakes of reality rained on Mercury as he put his new Skill to use. It was brutally efficient. Equal parts creation and destruction, taking the bits and pieces of the world, and making his own web from cuts and cutoffs. It was a bizarre experience, but he did see what it meant. To *create by removing*.

Cuts became an art. A mercy. A change for the better. He was equal parts barber and woodworker, and stonemason, and weaver. The world was his subject, and his claws shaped it. Pride had arrogance removed. Greed's excess was shaven off, and Lust lost its wildness. They all learnt restraint.

But in doing so, they grew incomplete. They were melded, half-molten pieces of a puzzle, breaking due to their lack, and consuming each other. Bits of string melted and flowed, and Mercury gave a gentle sigh. He <Carved> some more.

Jagged edges became smooth. Half-dissolved world-wounds were cleaned, their flaws polished, their sins cleansed but highlighted. They became a monument of the past, holding a better future. Every streak in the wood remained, but that was fine. It did not need to be uniform. The age of these wounds, the sins they committed, were also a part of their history.

But he carved the atrocities away. He could not undo them. People had died. But he could prevent any future ones.

More things were lost, and yet, there was a gain. Symmetry, balance. Mercury left raw edges where he could, but he took away their sharpness. Every violent end was dulled down, and he drew his claws across the world like a carving knife, whittling away at it. He polished, cut, reevaluated, and cut again.

Until, eventually, after hours and hours, he was tired.

There had been no interruption, because after his first cut, the avatars had lost their strings. He looked at that connection and removed it. Golden statues, faceless dealers, lustful beasts... they all fell. He removed the root, and then worked on the piece. He breathed.

In front of him was a network. A web, a terrifyingly large web of cuts, where he had carved into the rot of reality. Layer after layer he'd peeled away at what made the sins horrid, and

removed it for the future. The capacity for horror, the desire for pain and domination... was gone.

Now, these places had some capacity for good.

Of course, they would never be complete by themselves anymore. That was already set in stone when they fused. But that was alright. Mercury had made them into pieces that fit. He breathed in, and wove.

Strings attached and drew taut. The web he'd made suddenly changed, the strings pulling at each other. Each cut drew on another, and in a rippling, cascading motion, they all snapped towards the center. There was a single click as the pieces fell into place, and Mercury let out a sigh.

He unsummoned the Stifled Silence, and the silver filling the gaps in the world faded. What he was left with was a calm place. A shelter.

It was a gazebo in the rain. An umbrella against a harsh sky. There was confidence and desire there. Confidence in the self. Desire for happiness. And the initiative to reach out and take it.

What he'd made was a place... where people who wanted to die could go. He blinked, and realized it. "Ah," he said, smiling faintly. "Seems I've accidentally created Hope."

And with that small name being granted, things drew even tighter. The edges of his artwork came aglow with threads of silver light, drawing into rivers and ribbons. They laced through the edges of this pocket dimension, and the frail, woven connections fused. Mercury looked at the lightshow and nodded.

He saw it for what it was. *Chronagen*.

This world was one made from dreams and people. It was one that was so real, and it was also dreamt up by everyone in it, by everyone's desires. This place he had made was to be granted to people who desired death but deserved better. And that was a nice thought.

Mercury hoped he'd never need it ever again.

With a gentle breath, he watched the ribbons of light fuse this place properly, heal the wound on the world, and turn it into something new. A scar, yes, because that is what festering wounds leave behind, but also a mark. Of life, of healing, of moving forward. Because scars mean survival, and survival means hope.

A moment later, Mercury fused his minds back into one, sank into ihn'ar, shattered the veils, and stepped back across that eternal nothingness into his own house.

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Blood dripped on the wooden floor. Mercury blinked as he became largely corporeal again, and remembered the fact that he was rather... incomplete. He hissed for a moment, before letting the pain drain away, largely. There was a little more than his Skill could stomach, but that was fine.

He quickly wove himself in dull grey armor, letting the Dream of Starvation lick at his leaking blood. <Hydration> and <Resolution> were already hard at work stitching him back up. His armor licked the blood off the floor, and he simply let himself calm down. His frayed, frenetic heartbeat slowed.

Mercury listened to the sound of rain on the rooftop. And it was raining again. Stormbraver was one of those cities, the kind where the cobblestones never remained dry for too long. He sighed, softly, and then walked up the stairs, into his hammock.

Zyl sat at a table. They'd expanded the upstairs a bit, adding a desk for him to sketch on - Mercury had learnt a "sticky" rune from the mage's guild, and enchanted a few stacks of cut paper with it, that Zyl used to put little sketches on the walls. Sticky notes, effectively.

The dragon turned towards him. His red eyes wandered up and down Mercury's frame, scanning the dull steel. He frowned. "How much of you is missing underneath there?" Zyl asked calmly.

Heck. "About half," Mercury said. He didn't even have eyes to see, but he could still tell what Zyl's expression would look like. His boyfriend frowned wearily, dragged a hand through his hair, and gave a long, suffering sigh.

"You keep coming home when you're almost dead," he said, sliding the chair backwards from his desk. He got up, walked over to Mercury, and kneeled down. His hand nestled against the cold metal of the Dream of Starvation, wrapped around Mercury as a dark metallic skin. Zyl tilted his head. "You keep getting into fights. Why?" he asked. "Why do you not let me help you more?"

There was a sad note in his voice. A pain that said that he wanted to do more. Mercury took a deep breath, though his lungs were still regenerating, so it filled his mouth with blood. He

quickly swallowed that, turning his head to look into Zyl's eyes. "I need to do it myself, Zyl," he said.

"Why?" the dragon whispered insistently, leaning forward. "Why do you take it all on by yourself?"

And to that, there was no kind answer. Mercury looked at his boyfriend, at his lover, and simply had to be honest. All he could do was give the truth and hope it wouldn't break them apart. He took another second, then spoke, his voice a hum carried in the rain.

"Because it's who I am," he said. "I relish it. The challenge, the pain, the growth, the *change*. I get to make the world a better place, Zyl. Just a little bit."

A small look of pain flashed across the dragon's face. "Why can't we make the world a better place, instead of *you*?" he asked, almost desperately.

Mercury smiled gently, ruffling Zyl's hair with a ghostly hand. "Because *you* already do," he said. "You are incredible. But me?" Mercury shook his head. "I know that you disagree. Heck, most people in Stormbraver probably would. But proving over and over that I can do good... helps. It makes me feel useful. Even if I suffer. Even if I hurt. That all fades. But the fact that I've helped remains."

For a long moment the silence hung between them. Zyl leaned back, going from kneeling on the floor to sitting, crossing his legs. He leaned back, looking at the ceiling, listening to the rain.

"So, that's all? To prove yourself?" he asked, quietly.

"Not all," Mercury said. "I don't hate myself, if that's what you're thinking. I'm not compensating for some deep-seated loathing or anything. But I want my own achievements. My own legend. The more I match yours, the more easily I can welcome you in mine."

Zyl hummed softly. "That's true," he said. "You have taken me along more, recently."

The mopaaw gave him a smile. "I try." And he did. Every single time, he tried to accept help. And sometimes, he failed. Sometimes he ran into certain death and came out the other side. Sometimes he was cocky and arrogant and needed to be faced with that. And he was okay with all of it.

Every bit of pain that came from his own overconfidence was fine. He didn't mind it at all. There was a beauty in being challenged, in putting his all on the line to make the world better. Sometimes, he would do that. Right now, there were no two ways about that.

"The world isn't your responsibility," Zyl said. "Not every problem needs to be solved by you."

"Yeah, I know," Mercury said, sighing gently. "But I have a habit of making problems I see into my problems."

At that, the dragon nodded with a gentle, sad smile. "It's something I love about you. That you take initiative. That stupid sense of justice and fairness. That you try to bring the best out in everyone, to make them into the best versions of themselves." He sighed, gently. "And I hate that you do it for things that try to murder you."

Mercury faintly nodded. "I know. But someone should give them second chances. It can't be those hurt by them."

Because he remembered how his encounter with the sin of Gluttony had gone. The place that had killed his friends. He'd broken it in turn.

Compared to that, the sins that now tackled him got off easy. They got away with a few changes, and their natures fundamentally inversed, but... well. Some part of their legacy carried on. He could forgive them.

Even Bael, who had once been an avatar of Gluttony he could forgive. But when it came to the servants of the crimson sun? They were all dead. Not a single one left alive.

That was the funny thing about second chances. People should do better after messing up. But they were never owed forgiveness by their victims. To learn, become a better person, and bring more kindness into the world... Even people who'd fucked up could do that. Even the sins, places responsible for mass murder, could be turned into something good.

But could Mercury look someone in the eye who'd lost their best friend or their lover to Pride or Greed... and ask them to let it go?

No. He couldn't. That anger would be there forever, even after something changed. It was a fair anger, even. A reasonable one.

Zyl looked at his boyfriend for a long while. He traced a finger along the Dream of Starvation, the cold metal shell coating Mercury. Then, he sighed, the faint moonlight glinting in his eye. "Take off your armor," he said.

"I look rough," Mercury warned carefully.

The dragon just nodded. "I know. I still want to see."

A small shiver ran through Mercury, but he nodded. "Okay. Please, try not to hate me."

"I won't," Zyl promised.

With a thought, the metal shell around Mercury shifted. He could have dispelled it at once, but that would have hurt. Instead, he controlled it. Condensed the metal into itself, making it take less area.

First, it faded, exposing the parts of his fur that were still healthy. Bits of white were revealed as the metal sank away. That lasted a few moments.

When it retreated further, raw patches of skin showed. Places that had been cut and broken by Pride. Bite marks, where chunks of his flesh had been torn out by Lust. Blood pooled in the wounds, his flesh slowly writhing and growing as his body was putting itself back together. Strands of mana turned into flesh.

But then, the metal kept shifting. It unveiled the horror that had become of his face. Missing his tongue, lower jaw, and both his eyes. It peeled away from his chest, showing the cavity in which his heart beat to open air. Blood dripped into a puddle on the floor.

"That looks horrid," Zyl said calmly.

Mercury shrugged, though the motion came from his shoulders. All his legs were missing, and as the metal kept creeping back, he was lowered to the ground, his prostheses shrinking until he was left laying flat on his stomach, four raw, bleeding stumps for appendages.

"It's pretty bad," the mopaaw admitted, the pain becoming more raw as his blood touched open air.

The dragon sighed, then reached out, nestling a hand into his boyfriend's healthy fur. "You wanna see a healer?"

"No," Mercury shook his head. "Right now I wanna regenerate pretty badly. And I think it might take my self-healing to the next threshold."

A sad smile snuck onto the dragon's lips at that. "I thought you might say that."

"You don't like seeing me suffer," Mercury noted.

Zyl shook his head at that. "I don't," he said. "Yet, you're here. Hurting."

"It'll fade," Mercury said.

"It will," Zyl agreed readily.

"So you don't have to watch me suffer," the mopaaw said, smiling to the best of his ability - poorly.

Again, the dragon shook his head. His hair shone with the moonlight, the pooling blood gathering around Zyl's shoes. It didn't stain his clothes - they were too meticulous for that, but Mercury could see it pool around him. "I don't have to," Zyl said. "But I will, anyway."

At that, the mopaaw tilted his head. "Why?"

"I must learn," Zyl said, eyes glinting with warmth, pity, care and kindness. "And I will. I'll learn that sometimes you need to suffer. Sometimes, that's how life is. Sometimes, I can't solve that problem. And it-" his voice broke, and he gave a small chuckle, wiping his face. "It sucks. Seeing you bleed, seeing you broken. It sucks. But you know what? Sometimes you suffer. I don't want you too, and that's okay."

"For what it's worth, I'm sorry," Mercury said.

Zyl chuckled slightly, a soft kinda noise. "No, no need. You have nothing to be sorry for. This is life, sometimes, right?"

Mercury nodded, but couldn't meet his boyfriend's eyes. Instead, he withdrew his mana and insight into himself, letting the world around him dim. Until it became just the two of them, and the slowly pooling blood on the ground. "Sometimes, it sucks," Mercury said quietly.

"And it'll pass," Zyl added, slowly brushing a hand through bits of fur that were still white. "It'll fade. You'll heal, and things will be better."

"I'll get hurt again," Mercury said. The salt stung in his empty eye sockets.

Shrugging, Zyl nodded. He chuckled again, his chest shaking slightly with laughter and sadness. "Yeah, I know."

"I'm sorry," Mercury said.

"Zazaza!" Zyl laughed properly, for the first time. A sad laugh, but a true one. "You're hurt," the dragon said. "Don't apologize, dummy."

Mercury raised his head, meeting Zyl's eyes, though the mopaaw looked a little blurry in the dragon's vision. "Accept them, anyway?" he whispered.

A long, quiet moment passed between them. "Alright," Zyl said, leaning forward and kissing Mercury's forehead. He rested his own face against the mopaaw's head for a while. "You're forgiven," he muttered into Mercury's fur.

"Thank you."

Zyl nodded once. Then, he was silent for a while. When he spoke again, it was a simple request. "Heal quickly, will you?"

"I'll do my best," Mercury replied.

"You always do. Try a little less hard at some point," Zyl chuckled. "I love you."

"Love you too."

For the rest of the night, neither of them spoke.