

## Chapter 259: Ash and Redemption

/Crowns.

These things have a reputation among any sufficiently large people, don't they? Crowns. They're a symbol of status, of superiority, of being the greatest. A ruler, a champion, a monarch, yes?

So often when people are concerned, they are placed on the heads of the unworthy. Those made to rule who never should. Among people, those who covet crowns should never have them. Those who covet ruling are those who will fall prey to corruption quickest.

Luckily, when it comes to Skills, those function a little differently. Crown Skills, after all, are devastatingly powerful. They are granted not as a signal of rulership, but a symbol of absolute power. A symbol held by those who have achieved the very peak of what should be possible in their sphere of influence.

Well, saying "peak" is really rather disingenuous, isn't it? The Skills still level. They still grow. We still become more powerful. But if someone holds a crown, that makes them a threat. That makes them a terror in and of themselves, a truly horrifying thing to be facing on their chosen field of battle - because they are almost guaranteed to outmatch you.

Take, as an example, a prominent sect leader in the east. Ling XuHan, wielding a bright-blue crown. I know that much 'cuz I've seen it. I don't know its exact name, of course, because I didn't get close enough for that. I'm not suicidal, after all. But let me tell you what I did see.

I saw her fight above the open ocean. I saw her fight above waves that roiled as she moved. I saw the ocean itself twist open into whirlpools and spears, every droplet of water until the horizon rising up at her demands. The waves towered higher than any building I've ever seen, the sky turned grey with clouds, and it started raining.

A brutal torrent of unending water as the ocean itself went to war.

Before she donned the crown, there was an armada in front of her. A hundred ships, more than that, full of people. An army of thousands, just to fight her. Thousands of capable warriors. Thousands of people with dreams and aspirations of their own right, with Skills that should have made the waters their domain.

Thousands of corpses at the bottom of the ocean, now.

So if you want my advice on what to do when you see someone with a system bestowed crown? You run. You run fast, you run far, and you hope they don't come after you. That's what I did, and that's what you should do, too./

- An excerpt of "Types of Skills" by Anna Lyzer, System scientist.

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Zyl did not like donning his crown.

Zyl did not like burning things, usually. He didn't enjoy the feeling of exhaustion that came with it all. He didn't like turning into a full dragon, he didn't like pulling mana into himself like he was some kind of whirlpool or maelstrom. He didn't enjoy the sensation of how people looked at him, of feeling like some kind of out of control monster.

So many of his Skills were aimed at making his flames stronger and himself more resistant to them, because the simple fact is that that much was a requirement to even stand near him. To be underneath the crown of desolation was to bear its damning heat, and Zyl could do it. But he did not like it.

Because of what it represented, because it meant that he was, at heart, a destroyer. Good people don't leave desolation in their wake. Good people don't turn mountains into craters. Good people don't wipe out anyone in their vicinity by accident.

And yet, he donned it.

Mercury asked just once, asked for him to burn something, and Zyl wore the crown. He felt the way his heart beat faster. The way torrents of dragonfire poured out of him, into the crown, and were amplified into ambient heat. Around him, the air boiled and shimmered from heat distortion, in a mirage like amber.

He looked at the twisted air, and burned the image in his mind. The distorted way this world of Envy looked, caught in the heat haze like an insect in amber.

He remembered it, because it would be gone soon.

Heat blossomed like a flower. It stretched outwards like reaching petals, and since Envy couldn't help but want, it drew it in. Welcomed it with open arms, reached out and grasped the heat - and then its arms burnt.

The heat haze spread, fuelled by streaks of fire. Zyl's heartbeat rang out across the realm like beating drums, and it fell away to ash. All of it, every bit of desire, every envious eye on him, all of the streaking, insidious, infectious desire, was cleansed in the simple purity of flame.

Because for once, that aspect of his fire was useful. The fact that it was indiscriminate.

It ate up anything and everything. No mercy, no regard for good or evil. Fire didn't want, desolation didn't choose. It simply burnt. Because anything, absolutely anything in this world was susceptible to heat. If it didn't burn, it melted. Then boiled and turned to gas. And then, it would ionize and become plasma.

Fire, when violent enough, became a simple chemical process. A simple force so strong that it would tear apart electrons and atoms, reducing them to an ionized mess of heat and vibration. That's something that's really strange about it. At energies that high, heat and noise become one and the same.

Zyl stood amidst the desolation, amidst ash that had disintegrated into plasma, and sighed at the ringing. At the dull roar it all made. He sighed, softly, so quietly he couldn't even hear it over the screaming of air coming undone. It was a little funny, though.

His own sweat evaporated, then the molecule came undone, and then the hydrogen that had once been part of water *fused* from the heat.

Miniatures pops like tiny explosions went off as bits of once-water fused to helium. Bright light started spreading across this realm, bringing the horrible heat of it all with it. Zyl simply stood, wearing his crown as the temperature climbed.

And climbed.

And climbed some more.

"Ouchies," he heard over the heat, and turned to look.

Somehow, there he was. Mercury. Standing in the middle of a... Zyl blinked. A *field of flowers*. Right. The dragon couldn't help but let out a snicker. "What are you still doing here? You're gonna burn," he said.

Mercury, for his part, shook a flaming paw, before smothering the fire in the cloud-like cool and damp texture of his raiment. “Uhm, I’m your taxi back,” the mopaaw said, as if it made perfect sense.

“You’ll burn to death,” Zyl said drily - mainly because all of the saliva in his mouth rapidly boiled away as he spoke.

“I’m beginning to agree,” Mercury said. “The edge of the dreamweave is catching fire.”

Zyl hummed. “Yeah, rules of reality tend to get messy around crowns. See-” as if to punctuate his point, the plasma, and literal nuclear-fusion starmatter around him began to fall away into ash, anyway. It made no sense that it would become ash, but it did. Because that’s what desolation demanded.

“Yes, that does seem to be the case,” his boyfriend commented, oddly calm. “Well. It seems to be spreading circularly. Can you direct it?”

Zyl snickered again. “*Can you direct it*’ he asks,” the dragon muttered. “Yes, I can. It’s troublesome though. My ribs are already hurting from how hard my heart is beating.”

That much was true, at least. In his chest cavity, his heart was powered by his spark, and each time it pulsed, it sent waves of force coursing through his body, hard enough to rattle bones. It looked painful, almost like a muscle cramp.

Mercury smiled, gently. “Try to direct it. I’ll help.”

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The world was on fire, and Mercury stood on the edge of it. That feeling was a bizarre one. He wasn’t even truly in the same realm as Zyl, and yet, he felt the heat. The very edges of his dream caught aflame, and the heat whipped up winds that carried ash into his domain.

It was hot. Incredibly hot. To the point where he felt <Hydration> stop his blood from boiling. Yet, at the same time, he understood <Fire>, and a whispered request to stay away meant that his dream stayed largely at manageable heat. The kind where water began to boil away from the grass, but not the kind that had it instantly turn into a gas.

Desolation, however, carried a little less about that request, and still carried into it. Nothing burnt, but the heat spread, and Mercury felt his realm suffer, to a lesser degree. He could hold it in one piece - not being the target, and hiding in an entirely different dimension, really did quite a lot for the stability of this place.

What hurt a lot more was to see the way it bothered Zyl. His crown had only been burning for a dozen seconds, maybe two. In a minute or five, Mercury's entire dream would be ash, but by then, Envy would be long gone. No, it wouldn't burn that long. And yet, already, Zyl was hurting from it.

There was something weird about this Skill, something that made the dragon not want to use it. It drew an obscene amount of power, and also generated an obscene amount of heat. And Mercury just... stood there and watched. It felt unfair.

And so, he wanted to make it fair.

Once the decision was made, the next steps were easier. The <Rose Crown of Desolation> made for an unsubtle target, its tendrils of heat reaching out at anything in range, turning swathes of Envy into ash. The entire thing was clouded by the heat-haze by now, and it would not hold for much longer.

Mercury connected to that heat. He saw the tapestry expand in front of him, picked a connection, and traced his mind along a searing hot thread, right to Zyl's heart.

Gently, he closed his eyes. His mind burned, but the pain was carried away on a calm river. It did not matter. He would suffer for a while, then he would recover soon later. So, he simply bore with it, and followed the signal.

[<Tracking> has levelled up! <Trackling lv. 3 -> 4>]

The level up drifted past his knowledge, and led him to his destination. To the literal heart of it all. Mercury found his mind standing in front of a star. His mind was beset by bright, horrendously bright light. It was like standing on the surface of the sun. Reasonably, it should have charred him instantly...

But it didn't.

Mercury's body was tough, but his mind was tougher. It was deep, and it could keep itself alive by simply thinking himself into existence. It could withstand the outside of reality, the eye of any storm, and it could even take this searing heat.

He felt the pain wash over him. The sensation of his thoughts fraying from the heat, being burnt and seared, like wood in a campfire. Yet, the wounds mended. And, surprisingly, <Hydration> kicked in, turning his mind hardier, making the fire hurt less.

A gentle smile spread on his face as he beheld the enormous star. He breathed, even though there was no air, and watched, for a long moment.

Eventually, the star beat like a heart. It contracted, then expanded again, and for a moment, it engulfed and consumed Mercury. For a single breath, his entire world, his entire existence was fire. A spark of the horrible truth that hid in the heat, that nothing, absolutely nothing at all, was immune to incinerating heat. Not his body, not his mind, not anything. Not reality itself.

In a single moment, he saw the horrible enormity of fire, he felt himself be consumed and burnt, felt the way that the flames engulfed him and tore into his mind. The way that all of it was meaningless against the sheer enormity of the heat.

Then the moment passed.

[Your understanding of <Fire> has increased! <Fire (lowest) -> (medium)>]

His understanding jumped two stages in that single second. It left a lingering impression of his mind still burning, and he wrapped himself tight in the storm. The rain fell like a small blanket around him, and Mercury took a moment.

It shook him. For the first time in forever, there was a type of pain that genuinely hurt. It felt existential, terrifying. He licked his dry snout, and took a long moment. Then, finally, he smiled.

The star contracted again, almost convulsing, like a cramp. And Mercury connected to it.

Fire was indiscriminate. It consumed and hungered, and it should have devoured him, too, but it didn't. Mercury didn't let it. Instead, he lent the fire a hand. He tapped into <Grain of Infinity>, the star in his own chest, and activated it.

Energy coursed through him, out of him, pouring into the mess of incinerating flame. The contraction slowed, slightly. Mercury widened the channel, feeding more and more power. Outside, he could see Zyl's eyes widen as he breathed a little easier, and that felt vindicating enough.

He wanted his boyfriend safe. That was the <Truth>.

And because it was, power flooded out of him. An unending torrent of energy, provided by the spinning stellar body in Mercury's own chest. It fed the flames of desolation, fed the crown, fed Zyl's spark and the formless power became dragonfire. Mercury felt the hunger of infinity press against his mind, the heat tearing through his body, energy that he was not really ready to channel - and channelled anyway.

It hurt, but all the damage was meaningless. His body stitched itself back together faster than it could fray, and with each passing moment, it turned tougher.

[<Hydration> has levelled up! <Hydration lv. 6 -> 7>]

The lake of Envy turned to ash. The buried corpses and drowned dreams turned to ash, too. The giant tree of hanged victims turned to ash. Every single bit of this accursed dream was incinerated, reduced to the bare minimum required as proof that it, at some point, had been.

Desolation spread in the heathaze of the rose crown, fed by the hearts of a dragon and a cat. It was, in some words perhaps, beautiful. It was, in other words, horrifying.

It was the death of a world.

Zyl and Mercury killed that place.

And then, there was a shift. Mercury felt it in his Skills, a faint ripple that went through them first, then spread through this realm.

[<Medicine> has been subsumed into <Grain of Infinity>. <Grain of Infinity lv. 3 -> 4>]

A Skill vanished off his status, but it was still all there. It was simply an added function to the black hole in his heart now, the ability to feed others with its power. Medicine had been turned into fuel for the fire, reduced down to its essentials and reforged into a tether he could place, to feed others his health, his mana, his stamina.

And he didn't mind it.

The second tremor was one of the world, as the dream crumbled. It was turned to ash. The lake was gone, the corpses were gone, the very ground was gone. The ash itself began to disintegrate, and the weave of reality that this pocket was made from began to fray, too.

As always, the threads latched onto the nearest source of reality, and in this case, that was *almost* Zyl. In the last moment, Mercury whispered for the fire to be quiet, stepped forward, and wrapped his boyfriend into the embrace of his domain.

The crown had already winked out of existence, its rose tines falling away into nothing more than ash, desolation leaving itself desolated. Zyl looked a little gaunt, tired, and he sat in the grass. "Lay down," Mercury whispered. "I've got this."

Smiling faintly, the dragon nodded, and leaned back, letting his head fall upon soft fur, using Mercury as a pillow. It felt strangely intimate. Laying under a silver sun, the ashes of a dead world falling onto his face... Apparently, destruction didn't hurt so bad if someone loved you anyway. Maybe it was about breaking the right things, too...

Zyl didn't care. He simply drifted off to sleep, a dream within a dream within a dream.

And for his part? Mercury was *panicked*.

How the hell were the threads of the Dreamweave *on fire*?? Hello?? Reality was absolutely NOT meant to burn, and yet, he could feel it as the remaining, burning bits of this decrepit realm latched onto him. The fire wanted to crawl across the Dreamweave of his realm, wanted to consume it all into ash, and he couldn't let it.

The nexus, drawing the string tight, helped protect it. Whisperstar and Kim, the ecosystem he'd made... all of it meant that his dream was very stable. And still, its edges caught fire.

Rain fell onto the smouldering flames, quickly extinguishing them before leaks could spawn. Mercury took a brunt of the fire onto himself, holding threads at bay until they were extinguished. He held the entire weight of a world on his shoulders for those moments. It was hard, it was agonizing.

But what else was new?

He'd help up worlds before. They'd crashed into him, almost consuming him back then, but he was different now. He was stronger, he was more real than ever. His nexus was more refined, and the silver sun shone brighter than ever on his world.

He breathed.

The threads halted.

A million pieces of the dreamweave stopped moving as he willed them to. And the rain fell on each and every one of them.

[Your understanding of the <Dreamweave> has increased! <Dreamweave (low) -> (medium)>]

The fire on that world was extinguished.

Zyl took all of twenty seconds to turn it to ash. Mercury took about five minutes to put out the fires. And then, he ate the remains of the dream of Envy, and returned to the other part of its realm, where his physical body was wreaking havoc, too.

Only to find that it was already dying.

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Bael had done a lot of things wrong in her life. A lot of mistakes she could never fix. A lot of people she'd hurt.

And now, one of them stood before her. "Boy," she whispered.

"Breeze," he said. "My name is Breeze. And yours?"

There was a note of expectation. A quiver in his voice, barely restrained. Bael looked, and blinked. 'Why?', she wondered. Why was he giving her a chance to become a person in his eyes? "Bael," her lips said, quivering. Both of her demonic maws had spoken at once.

He nodded, and then forced a strained smile. "It's nice to meet you."

"We've met before," Bael said, not much more than a whisper. "I-"

"You killed me," Breeze nodded. Then, he looked behind her, and she could see tears in the boy's eyes. "And now, you save them. I would ask what makes me so different from them, but there isn't answer to that. It's you, after all. You're different now."

Behind Bael, there were humans. People from Stormbraver, huddled in tents, away from the grasping hands that the floor and the sky were made from. Protected by the monarch of all demons.

"And since you're different," Breeze said with a strained voice, "it's nice to meet you."

He stuck out a hand.

Despite everything, Bael shook it. Despite her anger at herself, despite wanting to scream, her voice came out quiet and hoarse. "Nice to meet you too, Breeze."

And the boy smiled, just a little. "Can you promise me something, Bael?"

"Anything," she said.

"Please, protect them all. I'm no good at that." Tears streamed down his cheeks as he said it.

"But I can break things. It'll get windy, so keep them safe, will you?"

Bael swallowed. Somehow, apparently, the world had decided that she deserved to be redeemed. She didn't deserve it. But she also wanted it, more than anything. "Yes," she said. "I will."

And the boy gave her a smile, still crying, as he stepped forward and vanished as a gust of wind. The breeze wrapped around her cheek in a whispered thanks, and then disappeared. And all at once, the rainstorm in the distance turned into a tearing, brutal hurricane.