

Chapter 262: Threats and Cats

Pride. Greed. Lust. Sloth.

Those were the remaining sins. Realms of excess and debauchery, of want and desire, of self-embodied perfection and demands of respect. They were rifts in the world, caused by human folly and primordial twists. How did other realms come to be, after all?

Did they spawn, spontaneously, out of nowhere? Did dreams and half-realities follow the laws of energy conservation? Could damage come from nowhere, or did rents in reality have to have cause?

The void leviathans that swim in the space between worlds, do they obey causality? Are they reasonable? Can a concept such as pride even watch another thing than itself?

Meaningless questions. The tree sins stared at Mercury. They saw him strut away from yet another site of butchery, yet another cleaned up part of this world where one of their siblings had once been. Another piece of sin, carved away and devoured into a realm that was a dream.

In truth, Greed wanted to devour Mercury, for it was greedy. Lust lusted after his dreams, his passion. And Pride simply could not bear to conceive someone deigning to challenge it, even the notion of that was disgusting.

They needed to work together.

And, of course, Pride protested. It fought for reasons to stop them from banding. It was perfect and complete. It was untouchable. It was an embodiment of arrogance and thus, working with others went against its nature. Pride was always meant to be a singularity, an idea taken to its extremes. Within it, there was only solitude, and as such, cooperation was intolerable.

Greed and Lust rolled their eyes, saying they would easily be its subordinates, and the problem was solved. They'd cooperate then, the alliance of sin, and smash that newborn world before it properly blossomed, before it devoured more realms and grew into itself.

Sloth, however, refused. It was already lazily drifting towards Mercury, but the simple thought of organizing cooperation could not happen. Sloth was too lazy to think. It refused to plan or work together... all it did was move on instinct. As if rolling in its sleep.

So it was down to the three of them. Pride, Greed and Lust. To kill the realmeater before he grew.

However, they were not the only ones watching Mercury.

The light of day fell onto the world, and everything the light touched was His. When the Dawn of Day touched upon Mercury's realm, He saw it. And it was his. Yet, the realm vanished again, and that drew His eye properly. It was too heavy to vanish quickly now, too bright to be a secret, and the light had seen it... so where had it gone?

The Light watched. And He hoped there wasn't a thief among the mortals. Because if someone stole from Him, then that would have to be met with retaliation.

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Mercury bathed in the sunlight, even though it felt slightly colder today. That was fine, of course, he didn't truly need it to stay warm. His body was perfectly adept at maintaining his body temperature with the energy it produced. Still, it was a little frustrating that the sunlight didn't do its job properly.

The mopaaw gave a soft sigh at that, prompting Zyl to smile faintly and ruffle his hair as they walked. He didn't even have to bend down for it anymore, since Mercury had grown rather tall for a cat these days. "Something getting under your skin?"

"Nah," Mercury brushed him off with a shake of his head and a faint smile. "It's nothing."

Zyl raised an eyebrow at that, the dragon apparently not believing him. "Really now?" he asked. "You only say that when you've got a hunch you don't wanna share."

That made Mercury snicker. "Tragically, my hunches are never 'nothing', you're right," he lamented, his tail curling in faint amusement. "I feel a bit colder than I should, that's all."

“Like the sun doesn’t reach you properly?” Zyl asked, looking at the sky, squinting at the sun as if he was trying to pick a fight with it.

“Exactly,” Mercury nodded, shooting his boyfriend a somewhat suspicious glance. “How’d you guess?”

Zyl gave a long hum before answering, shielding his eyes as he kept them on the sky.

“Hmmm. Because I feel the same way,” he said. “Want me to go beat it up?”

“Hah! You can’t beat up the sky, silly,” Mercury laughed. The sentiment filled his heart with the warmth that the star failed to provide. And he was right to remind himself that the sun was just a star. After all, he was Mercury Rainfall *Starlight*. If the sun wasn’t warm enough, he would simply glow more.

“Not with that attitude,” Zyl said, throwing him a smile, finally placing his suspicions aside. He sighed softly, contently. “We should take walks more often. It’s nice.”

Mercury nodded along, looking at the greenery pass by step by step. “It is,” he agreed. “The old man does make good roads.”

“He’s a crafter, that’s for certain,” Zyl said, with a twinge of pain to his voice. “Best I could do is burn a channel through the world.”

At that, the mopaaw bumped into his legs, rubbing his shoulder against his boyfriend’s thighs. “C’mon, Zyl. Don’t be like that. If you keep at it, maybe you’ll be painting roads into reality soon. Or growing them from seeds. All a matter of time, and you’ve got plenty of that.”

Despite their smallness, the words made Zyl smile. He reached his hand over again, digging it into Mercury’s soft fur, scratching the mopaaw behind his ears. “Yeah,” he hummed, taking a deep breath. “You’re right, of course. Plenty of time. I’ll get there.”

“You will. I think that’s part of what makes you special,” Mercury said.

“What is?” Zyl asked, raising an eyebrow.

“That you want to make,” the mopaaw replied. “That you don’t like breaking things. Well, I think that much is fairly normal, but... well. Your reluctance to use your Skills, it seems to go against the core of the system, doesn’t it? It grants Skills based on *desire*, after all. Yet, you don’t strike me as an arsonist.”

Zyl gave a sad smile at that. He nodded, just once, and looked away. "Yeah, I don't. And yet, here we are. I suppose..." he paused, and sighed, and for a while, they walked in silence. It took a long few moments for Zyl to answer, but Mercury was in no hurry. He would simply listen.

"I suppose," the dragon eventually repeated, "that I do like lighting things on fire. I think there's something pretty there. Watching the flames go. Seeing things turn to ash. There were... there *are* a lot of things I want to burn down. I like being strong, and fast. All of those are true." He gave a sad smile as he talked, staring off into the horizon. "But I also want to be able to build. Does that make me greedy, Mercury?" he glanced at the mopaaw. "Is that so wrong?"

"Not at all," Mercury said, shaking his head with a smile. He met Zyl's eyes easily, his own swirling with acceptance. "I think some things deserve to be burnt down. Sometimes, you need ash to let things regrow. And sometimes you need to actually grow things, right?"

Zyl nodded slowly, not answering. He still had that far-off look. Mercury kept talking.

"My Skills aren't all bright. They're greedy, too. Some are meant for destruction. All of them could be used for it. And that's okay. I'm going to break some things. I am going to kill some people. And I'm... well, not exactly *okay* with that," he said with a sad smile. "But I understand that it'll happen. It doesn't kill me inside. Is that similar to your burning?"

"A little," Zyl said, whisper quietly. His voice was soft and vulnerable. "I like burning. I like growing. It feels good."

Mercury gave a gentle smile. "So long as you're burning the right things, I think that's okay."

"Luckily, I have you to point me at the right things, don't I?" Zyl asked with a small snicker, and Mercury just nodded along.

The mopaaw bumped into the dragon in companionship one more time. "We'll figure it out."

For a long while, the two walked in silence. When they spoke again, it was about more meaningless things, and the sunlight felt warm in Mercury's fur again. They walked until the canopy receded and Stormbraver appeared on the horizon, then they walked some more.

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Coming home was nice. Mercury knew that much, of course. It was the same every time. Opening his door and finding his peace in there. He considered that his greatest fortune.

That wooden house that he'd helped put together. He still made modifications sometimes, practicing his crafting skills and Skills. It was kind of funny, trying to get his rijn or <Sever> to be precise and fine enough to take shavings off of wood. But he was improving.

By now, he even had a small workshop. Digging out a basement hadn't been too much trouble - there was always room to expand downstairs, and Mercury had built the wooden stairs himself. They weren't that smooth, a little rickety, and they creaked underneath Mercury's paws, but they held his weight.

He was learning from every project, which was nice. And with <Magical Metallurgy> as well as <Force of the Hecatoncheires>, he could make himself any tools he needed. <Grass> also could help wood regrow some, so he could make minor fixes rather easily.

All of that, though, didn't help him when there was a knock at the door. With a gentle sigh, Mercury dragged himself up, and opened the door. And, indeed, it was as he feared: the city council. No one he knew, as they'd seemingly sent a new oldie down to his place. It was a woman with short, white hair, coming up in curls that framed her head, and that did nothing to soften her light grey eyes.

"Good day," she said in a voice like a creaky willow. "I assume that you are Mercury?"

Holding back a sigh, he nodded. "That would be me."

Her eyes curled upwards with a small smile, lighting up a touch, the lines well-worn into her face. "My name is Maria Twirne. Do you know why I'm here?" she asked.

"I can make a reasonable guess," Mercury readily admitted.

She nodded sagely, then extended a hand. "My thanks," she said.

Mercury blinked. "Huh?" he asked, looking at her outstretched fingers.

The woman smiled some more, and there was some mischief in that expression. "We weathered another storm," she said. "Do you blame the lightning rod for attracting a bolt to your house?"

"... No?" Mercury tried, still a little confused.

"Yes, there was damage," the woman said, nodding. "Yes, people were in danger. Some got hurt. But this city is full of hardy people, Mercury. We've rebuilt from a war. We've rebuilt from greater storms. This is simply yet another time to rebuild. Would lightning have struck

here eventually if you hadn't been around?" She shrugged, pulling at the hems of her pale blouse. "Who can say? But you helped weather the storm. That is what matters. So, I am here to thank you."

Her hand was still stretched out. Mercury looked at the woman, noting the small glint in her eyes, but despite his better judgment, he reached out a paw and shook her hand. It was bearable, since it was a somewhat formal touch and on his terms, and she soon let his paw go again. "I'm glad I'm not in trouble."

"Oh, you are," she said. "I'm here to tell you that we want you to do some community service. I'm told that this time, people were dragged into a horrible dimension made of hands. People will have nightmares, and we would like for you to help with the trauma management."

That... sounded surprisingly reasonable. "Is that all?" Mercury asked.

Maria raised her eyebrows, the wrinkles on her face stretching. "Do you want me to assign you more work, Mercury?"

He shook his head.

"Then it's all," the old woman said with a faint smile, and a raise of her hand. "We'll be sending you a list of people to visit soon." She turned around and began to walk away. "Ah, one more thing," she said with her back turned. Her voice was more frigid, this time. "We're looking past this. In the future, please try even harder to keep our citizens safe, Mr. Starlight."

And she walked off. The vague threat hung in the air, but Mercury gave a soft sigh of relief. This really wasn't that bad. Frankly, he would have offered his help to anyone who was struggling with the sight they'd been through anyways. A few people had probably been dragged underground by the reaching hands, and then saved when the realm died.

Which sounded rather... intense, even to Mercury, so helping seemed reasonable. It was also something his skillset made him rather decent at, so he'd happily be doing some community service. He'd even open his doors, if that made people happier.

Hopefully, the rest of the sins got the picture and simply went after him. That would make things cleaner. If they went after Stormbraver again, he would have to pull out every single stop, and bring out every single weapon he had, after all. Otherwise, he'd do it himself.

Of course, he'd also be trying his best to force them into only taking him. His quicksilver crown *could* freeze an entire realm if given enough time. Perhaps he could accelerate that? Glue any exit wound shut before it properly opened? Something to think about.

Sighing softly, Mercury shut his door, threads on the <Tapestry> glistening as he thought. There was so much to consider, after all. So many things that were all interconnected.

It was beautiful and scary, knowing that so many people he held dear were all in one place... Maybe he should ask Kintra to move to Stormbraver one of these days? He was due another visit to Trey no soon. And he owed it to Marsh and old man Alex, too. "Hey Zyl?" he asked.

"Hmmm?" came the reply from the atelier, another small addition.

"Wanna go on a trip sometime soon?" Mercury invited the dragon.

"Gasp!" Zyl said, speaking the word out loud instead of actually. After a moment, Mercury heard a brush dramatically clattering to the ground - not the one Zyl had actually been painting with, but instead a clean one. "Are you finally inviting me on one of your trips?" the dragon asked, with more shock than was appropriate.

Mercury smiled at his antics. "You're bullying me."

"No more than you deserve," Zyl replied, stepping into the common room and running a hand through his hair. He managed to look darned handsome in his painting suit. And it was still a tailored suit - a little less fancy than the white one, but equipped with self-cleaning enchantments that would get the paint off. "Yes, I'd like to come along," he said.

"I'll let you know, then" Mercury nodded along, his tail lightly swishing through the air. He stared at Zyl for another handful of moments, before heading out to do his own things, and further unravel the mysteries of magic.

And time passed.

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[You have acquired the Skill <Novice Woodworking> through a specific action!]

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

"That's good work," Yasashiku said with a nod, stroking his beard as he turned over the tool with his other hand. It was a chisel, a well forged, tempered, sharpened piece of steel, with a

slightly crude wooden handle that Mercury had made himself. It was turned on a lathe - that one Mercury had bought, rather than made himself. He used his *rijn* to create a solid, sharpened chisel-like thing, locking it in space to work the wood down.

"Thank you, teacher," Mercury dipped his head.

Yasashiku nodded absent-mindedly. "The metal's slightly soft, coulda given it a bit longer to temper. You'll have to resharpen often. But that's fine, makes maintaining it a bit easier." The smith turned it over in his hands. "I could... well, the crystal lattice is a bit off. There are some stresses right along the middle of it, but those probably won't cause any trouble for normal use. Don't go trying to work magical wood with it, though. It'll fracture."

"Could you make normal steel tools strong enough to keep up with magical ones?" Mercury asked, curiously.

The old smith scoffed. "Yeah, of course you can. What do you think makes magical metal magical?" he asked.

Mercury tilted his head at that, considering it for a moment. What *did* make it magical? "There's... mana inside it?" he hedged.

"Sure, there's mana in everything, though, Starlight-kun. What else?" Yasashiku asked, smiling faintly and leaning back in his chair.

"Does the mana have to have an elemental alignment?" Mercury guessed.

Yasashiku crossed his arms, shaking his head. "No. It can, but it does not have to. Pause and think it through properly, Starlight-kun. This is something you can answer."

And Mercury did. Instead of just guessing again, he looked at his chisel, the thing he'd just made. He understood <Metal> and how to work it. There was an intuition to it all, but at the end of the day, everything they did was just influencing the molecular lattice at the heart of it all to be uniform, or have specific properties.

They trapped carbon in it to make it more flexible, tempered it to make it harder but more brittle... He thought about it, but it all came down to the pattern, didn't it? The way that the atoms were aligned. So, then, if everything had mana in it... "It's the way the mana is arranged," Mercury said, knowing he was right.

"Indeed," Yasashiku nodded gruffly. He took out an ingot of magical metal, the kind of stuff that Mercury could technically already work with, but didn't yet. He was still polishing his

basics. “This is soulsteel,” the smith explained. “It’s steel, as the name implies. But it’s also more than that. Look at it, sense the mana inside.”

Doing as asked, Mercury expanded his own field. The mana poured from his pores easily, forming tendrils that let him more easily reach out and understand what was going on with the metals. At first, all he felt was the vague shape of the ingot, so he forced his mana into finer and finer tendrils. Tiny extensions out of his body, made to note tiny things.

Eventually, as he reduced it down to perceive even smaller imperfections, he saw the triz, the smallest units of mana. Tiny droplets, singular units that weren’t enough enough to call them that, suffusing the metal. And he saw that they were arranged a certain way.

Not perfectly, not all of them, but a good chunk of them were trapped into a lattice that felt... almost sinister. Like it held a breath of unlife. And Mercury realized it. “They’re forming a natural magic circle. It’s converting mana that passes into it into more... is that soul mana?”

“It is,” Yasashiku nodded. “See, these kinds of metals are sometimes used by mages to figure out how to make new mana types. When we first found stariron, that led to the discovery of solar mana. Mana wants to make more of itself. Give it enough time and a container that can hold the structure, and it’ll eventually form conversion circles all on its own. It’s why undeath spreads like a plague, and how groves of life can replenish over time.”

“Then how do plants do it?” Mercury asked.

Yasahiku smiled faintly. “I’m a poor woodworker, you know this,” he said with a dramatic shrug, but there was a faint smirk playing on his lips, as if he was playing a prank. “But I s’pose I do know *some* things about it,” he admitted. “Plants usually work with stamina. Crystallized stamina, or having it locked in self-replicating flows. It gives even parts that have been cut off and shaped their own life, allowing for self-repair and durability, as well as a myriad other things.”

Tilting his head, Mercury thought that over. “Don’t they have any mana?”

“Some,” Yasashiku nodded. “Most often some kind of life-aspect. But it’s more rare. Mana disperses to the cores of living things after they die. So that’s where plants’ mana usually goes after harvesting. Little remains in the wood.”

“Plants have cores?” Mercury asked.

“Anything living with mana has a core,” Yasashiku nodded. “Just like anything with stamina has a vessel. It’s just that stamina is a lot better at sticking around in things that used to be alive, and mana can also gather in inanimate things.”

Mercury slowly nodded. It made... some amount of sense. Metal for mana, wood for stamina. “Then how do things like my Storm’s Raiment work?” he asked.

For a long moment, Yasashiku eyed the billowing cloak of clouds, the way it swirled and moved. Then he shrugged. “I dunno,” he said simply.

“Huh?” Mercury asked.

“No clue,” Yasashiku replied. “Well, not exactly. Bound items are finicky, Mercury. They feed off of and into your Skills. Using a bound item enough can grant you a new Skill, you know? You’ve only ever used electricity through items, yet, recently, I’ve seen it crackle around you when you use that weird rain Skill of yours,” he noted.

“I thought it had just gotten stronger,” Mercury said.

The old man shook his head slowly. “No,” he said. “What you do influences what you want. What you want influences what you are. Using electric items makes you used to being able to do it. Being used to doing a thing means you try to reach for it instinctively. Then, the system responds. Your Skills change.”

Mercury blinked at the explanation. That was... bizarre. It made sense, because the system did respond to what he wanted. The aspect of *desire* that it held, the way it allowed people to reach for the things that they were desperate for was both its greatest advantage and its greatest tragedy.

Breeze just wanted to run, so he ran after he died. Baelzebuth was hungry, so they were granted the ability to eat. The changelings used to be envious, so they could steal. Those were the great tragedies of desire.

And yet, here he was. Simply wanting to cast magic, to make things, to help people. And he was granted that, too. Marcel got to heal, Lucia got to love, and Zyl learned how to paint. Because of the way that things worked there was always, always a way for people to get better by wanting to be better and working towards it.

That strange dichotomy made Mercury smile. Still, though, the old man had avoided the question for long enough. "Come now, Yasashiku-sensei. You made my Cloudmatter Shawl before it fused with the Dracoleather Cloak. Surely you know at least some of how it works."

Scratching his beard awkwardly, the old man let out a wry sigh. "Haaah. What am I going to do with you, Starlight-kun? Yes, fine. I know how it works. There's a few rather complicated mana circuits in there."

Mercury's eyes widened with curiosity. "Go on."

Again, the old man sighed. "Well, one for dimensional mana, to create it and maintain a pocket space. One for self-replication of the cloudmatter so it can shift, another one for the conversion and absorption of lightning and electricity - that one actually forms a faux-core with the circuits in order to store the energy."

"That's... quite a bit," Mercury noted.

"It's just the surface," Yasashiku said with a wry smile. "See, to bind an item, there's a ton of rather complex enchantment. Letting it be summoned and dispelled, giving it a different form that makes it stable to hover around the soul, automatic shapeshifting to fit the body of a user... Yes, it's complex." He waved the mopaaw off. "Dissect it on your own time once you've learnt a bit more enchanting. Your runework has gotten decent, but it's still far from good," the smith chided.

It wasn't true. In the time that Mercury had learnt to work with metals, his runecarving skills had increased immensely, even fused into his metallurgy. He was good at enchanting, but not good enough to meet the old master's standards.

As much as Mercury was incredibly skilled, Yasashiku still had decades of experience on him - *focused* experience. The old man was a master of his craft, of anything that needed to be hit with a hammer. Mercury had seen him make and undo roads with simple swings, his technique somehow self-replicating along the ground.

Every time he saw it, it was still wondrous. Not something Mercury needed, since he was rather decent at finding his way without roads, but it was still a testament to Yasashiku's Skills. So, instead of arguing, Mercury just smiled and nodded. "Yes, teacher. I'll work on my enchanting more."

"Now, now," Yasashiku chided quickly, bringing up his hands. "Focus on your blacksmithing before your enchanting."

“Scared you’ll lose your prized pupil?” Mercury teased with an evil smirk.

At that, the old man grumbled into his beard. “Fine, then,” he said grumpily, waving the mopaaw off. “Practice what you will. I’ve only got one foot in the grave. Your loss if you aren’t good enough before I get my second foot in there.”

“Hah! You’ll outlive me yet, old man,” Mercury said, smiling. Yasashiku simply shot him a glance, then gave a long sigh. The mopaaw laid a ghostly hand on the old man’s back, patting it lightly. “Come on. We’ve still got enough daylight left to make another workpiece.”

Yasashiku smiled faintly. He wasn’t that old, really, but he was old. Passing on his smithing to someone who was actually learning it properly was an opportunity he cherished. Even if his disciple was an idiot who constantly ran off to solve problems he had no business dealing with. Even if he was a moron who got into trouble every few days, who asked too many favours, who bothered him at odd hours of the day, and who was altogether a troublesome troublemaker.

Despite all of that, Yasashiku took up his hammer and nodded. “Watch closely,” he said. “And I might teach you how to hammer some magic into a piece of iron.”

And Mercury took yet another step on his journey of magic, moving from runes to proper enchantments.