

## Chapter 237: Carnage. Chaos.

Blood splattered *everywhere*.

Tor-Tern's head exploded. The hydra's body was held together by faerie magic, and Mercury's silvery ember would not permit any other magic in its presence.

<Grief> dug its claws into the half-dragon. The blood coalesced, cracked, then exploded. Insidious magic snuck into his being, enforcing silence and the crushing weight of mourning. A storm rose in the banquet hall, raindrops drenching the grass.

The court of Murder's ancient one didn't get involved. Mercury didn't care either way. The time for negotiation was over. Tor-Tern had to die, and that was that.

All around him, in the half-manifested garden of his, domains crashed and spilled forth.

Titania fought Oberon.

Two faerie rulers, caught in a horrible clash of spring and autumn. Leaves died then sprouted anew, decay fuelling growth fuelling decay. Their manifested worlds pushed against each other and against Mercury's dream, like actors fighting for the stage.

Trees sprouted, grew, then turned to mulch within seconds. Emerald grass bowed its head then rose again as the ebb and flow of the fight permitted it. Their words were extinguished by the howling winds, silent and meaningless in the rainfall.

In front of Mercury, Tor-Tern laughed. It was a terrible noise, grating and cruel, but the ruler of Murder could not speak. There was no more need for words. With two heads left, Tor-Tern descended on Mercury in a storm of red.

Blood crashed into him like a hurricane wavefront. Mercury had his breath knocked out to him, his fur drenched, and was tossed into the air like a ragdoll. His chest hurt. His body adapted instantly, pushed by <Hydration>, his heart beating faster, his bones thickening to withstand the waves.

A maw of fangs sprouted from the bloody torrent, only to be disintegrated by yet another lance of silver. A dozen wings formed from blood, half shattered by the rain, and the other half slamming into Mercury.

His ribs groaned in agony, and he slid back again. The grass slowed him down, softened the impact, and the wind turned to let him face his enemy. His cloak and shawl billowed, crackling with lightning. Javelins spilled from his inventory, crackling and hissing, held aloft by <Force of the Hecatoncheires>.

Mercury sharpened his mind, held his breath, watched and waited as the blood came again, and smashed the full force of his rijn against the wavefront.

This time, Tor-Tern was sent tumbling. The blood coalesced back into the shape of a hydra, bouncing twice before coming to a stop. The <Grass> wrapped around the murderer, holding it down, and Mercury came forward.

A javelin shot forward, charged with electricity, annihilating some of the blood. It was laced with Mercury's <Thread>, as thin and sturdy as he could weave it, aiming to cut and stick and make Tor-Tern forget who they even were.

Dozens of attacks hit the wave of crimson in a moment, but it shifted and spun out, spiralling back into the sky, forming that same hydra again. Three heads bore down on Mercury once more, each opening its maw and spewing a flood.

It was fire and acid and choking gas, crashing into his storm in a battle for supremacy. <Rainfall> clashed with the onslaught... and lost.

But Mercury was long out of its way.

With a single step from <Itinerant>, he had crossed a vast distance, rising from beneath Tor-Tern in a spiralling tower of liquid silver. More javelins announced him, each slamming into the blood-monarch with a silent thunderclap.

The air began to hum with electricity, each discharge bringing more crackling power to mercury's storm. He felt the Dracoleather Cloak charging up. His Stormbringer Javelins and the cloak's <Stormbringer> blessing synergized. The lightning reinforced itself, and Mercury was positively crackling with power.

Blood came crashing down, malicious and horrible, but it was met by a torrent of silver. Heavy and noxious, it waged a war against blood, but there were more weapons at Mercury's disposal. His mind was open, sunk into ihn'ar, and split into three. Each one did as much as he could make them do. He wielded all fifteen of his javelins at one, tethered with <Thread>, constantly throwing, recalling and weaving them.

And then, his charge reached the maximum.

All at once, Mercury poured a torrent of mana into a javelin, enhancing its charge, and then blessed it with the full might of <Stormbringer>.

The resulting lightningbolt was *blinding*.

In a single moment, the patchwork sky turned entirely white. The world was replaced by an iridescent hell that would have turned any ordinary person blind.

But Mercury wasn't ordinary.

He was it unfold, and in that single moment of thunder, he worked to <Unravel> it.

His mind was backed by so many Skills. <Clarity>, <Perseverance>, <Oceanic Consciousness> and, most importantly, <Truth>.

Mercury didn't bend against the flash of white and red, he didn't break, he didn't stop or slow down. He looked within it, at the vulnerable murderer and began picking them apart, piece by piece.

For a moment, Tor-Tern was bathed in agony, their body falling apart under the electric current. Then, they were torn apart, like a soggy ball of yarn.

It started with a single thread that Mercury grasped, though it was horribly long. Cruelty. He pulled and pulled and pulled until he saw it all.

The ruler squirmed and bit at him, but their teeth didn't find purchase on Mercury's mind. It was an unshakeable beacon, anchored and endlessly overwhelming.

What they did find was a nightmare. As Tor-Tern was so very busy raging in his small prison, Mercury activated <Sever>. Not on the thread of cruelty he'd just <unravell>, but instead on another one of Tor-Tern's heads.

The Dream of Starvation lashed out, carving a great gash in the ruler's neck, and it shrunk. The sinister steel drank from the fae monarch's blood, making them lesser and itself greater. It was an almost perfect counter to Tor-Tern, whose entire body was nothing but a meal for the weapon.

But it was not that easy.

Blood and murderous hatred shot out like a weapon, hundreds of spears shooting forth. Two of them, Mercury didn't manage to avoid, having them pierce through his flesh, both shooting through his back and out his side.

The crimson liquid scraped against his bones, the spikes trying to multiply inside his own body, but he <sever> them before they had a chance to. Gaping holes were left in him, but he didn't mind it. The pain was swallowed and fuelled his <Grief>.

Noxious silver spiralled ever higher into the sky, crawling in from the cracks in the world only Mercury saw. It stabbed and dug and ate at the ruler of Murder, forcing them to take a different path.

Tor-Tern screeched silently. They had to fight Mercury differently, straight up, and shifted. Rather than a massive creature, they shrunk down, to the size of an average human. The blood compressed down endlessly, becoming heavier and heavier. Fuelled by rage and bloodlust, this new shape was all claw and teeth all over.

No longer were there distinct heads, instead, they took a rapid step towards Mercury, entangling him into a brutal melee.

Mercury adjusted. <Combat Sense> triggered alongside his learning Skills, and he improved rapidly in close combat.

<Force of the Hecatoncheires> dealt out a dozen hits each second, clashing with teeth and claws from the monster he faced. Silver spears struck at them from the ground, but Tor-Tern tore through them ferociously. In a slugfest, they had Mercury bested.

A titanic blow crash into him, breaking even his stat-reinforced bones. Claws raked his skin, drawing deep furrows of red. His own blood started trying to mutiny inside his body, crystallizing before he forced it to obey his will again. The storm *raged*.

Pound of flesh demanded penance, and each blow Tor-Tern dealt was recompensed. Raindrops tore chunks from their compressed form. <Sever> cut into them, now stacked directly on top of the Dream of Starvation. <Itinerant> showed Mercury the path through the barrage, and <Truth> made him unbreakable, and feint entirely pointless.

Blow by blow, the two of them tore each other apart.

Mercury thought, his minds racing, as yet another blow gouged more of his flesh. He lost a chunk of a cracked rib, torn from his body by the monster's claws.

It was brutal, and horribly painful, but he still had more aces up his sleeve.

First, the Cloudmatter Shawl adjusted. It adapted to elements passively, but now, it turned crimson. Blows found themselves swallowed by the red cloud around Mercury's neck. And then, he gave a command.

"Unravel," Mercury said.

He had remained silence since manifesting the Stifled Silence, and his words crashed into the world with brutal force.

Tor-Tern let out a voiceless scream, a horrible noise as his physical and astral form began to come apart thread by thread. Cruelty and hatred and disdain laid bare. Grand desires for suffering and rulership were all revealed to Mercury. It was all backed by a grand desire for freedom, for greatness, and by an endless ocean of anger and fury.

The manifested dream shook as the ruler angrily snapped back into one piece, but Mercury had seen what he needed to see. The cadence shifted, the battle changed.

Suddenly, Mercury read the attacks of the murderer as if he could see the future. Blows that should have gouged flesh were costly only for Tor-Tern. The mopaaw slid back, avoiding blows, his body bleeding and battered, but his mind unyielding.

And then, stretching his minds to their utmost limits, he called for yet another strength increase.

<Astral Advent>.

The world spilled open, and Mercury's astral body fully filled his form in this world. His self from his dreams, all that power, all that will filled his frame. His eyes glowed with power, and he triggered <Unravel> once more.

Blood was forced into the form of thread, falling apart.

Once again, the pattern repeated. Almost annihilated, the murderer snapped back into one piece. Diminished. Hungry pathetic. And so very dangerous.

It lashed out like a cornered animal, and Mercury felt almost bad for what he was putting Tor-Tern through. But that pain, too, was another one on the pile of <Grief>, another bitter regret to add to the pile.

And then, things shifted again.

Oberon crashed into Mercury in the shape of a vengeful ghost. Insectoid chittering and the buzzing of chitin wings rose over the storm, over the mournful quiet. Tiny limbs dug into Mercury's open wounds, making him gasp for a moment.

He was sent flying again, leaving pieces of his body impaled on Oberon's many limbs. The faerie king was spilling apart, unwrapping appendages and claws. Titania instantly fell upon him with a vengeance, but the opportunity was created, and Tor-Tern dealt another horrid blow to Mercury.

But the fae were never easy.

Once again, the world opened. Salt and Skye. A leviathan from the darkness, and a living lightning bolt suddenly stepped onto the field. Reality quivered as their full might descended, enhancing Mercury's <Rainfall>.

This was a true storm. Dark, foreboding clouds in the sky, lighting up with thunder. The rain turned acidic and abrasive with salt, grating to the skin, hostile to all life. It ran into Mercury's wounds and burnt, but disinfected them. The blood stopped spilling out.

Skye took hold of one of Mercury's javelins.

One of the creature's arms disintegrated entirely, flowing into the weapon, the bones snapping and cracking at the force contained. She threw the javelin at Tor-Tern, and the ruler of Murder exploded entirely, blood splattering everywhere. Not dead, but hurt.

Not meant to last, the world shook again. Scorching heat descended, the grass lighting on fire. A new sun blossomed in the manifested dreams, bringing sweltering heat so brutal that the clouds evaporated into nothing. Rain and blood instantly turned to steam upon touching the ruler of Scorch.

The radiant figure wrapped in luminescent wings descended on Skye, before again the world opened, and icy chill spilled into it. Zanyr of Chill turned their thousand eyes upon the ruler of Scorch, and ice clashed against heat, an eternal stalemate.

One by one, the world ripped open. Again and again. Illusion against Affection. Shadow and Rust and Dust crashed into the world as a flood of darkness and decay, things breaking in their presence. Honesty, too, was in the middle of the field, Seifes dancing around blows, blinding and poisoning.

Mercury had made more allies than enemies. Illusion was mostly neutral. Scorch, Mellow, and Murder stood against him. All others? On his side.

And yet.

It wasn't a slaughter. It was a brutal, horrible, drawn out kind of fight. Each blow demanded one in return. Each time someone was in someone else's way, something broke. It was a hellscape of clashing colours, lies and truths manifesting physically.

Insectoid chittering, the smell of rot, the cold of winter and darkness, the smell of iron and ash and ozone and the taste of salt...

It was enough to almost drive Mercury insane.

A million little sensory details flooded the world. All of its laws were bent at once. The world shook, stretched horribly thin by so many domains, until the poisonous silver could not hold it together anymore.

Mercury was the first to notice. The most perceptive. He saw the first split as <Nothingness> crawled in through the edges. The hungry horror from beyond that wanted nothing more than to end the fae realm.

He needed to stop it. That was the <Truth>.

With his mind stretched thin, with his fingers so deep in each of his resources, Mercury dug for more. His rijn was a needle, his will the thread. He stitched the hole in reality closed with a hundred hands, and a new one tore open.

Blood flowed from his eyes, lips, ears and nose. Mercury didn't breathe, forgot to have his heart beat as his will bore to keep the world intact. To keep the fae realm alive as he had done so many times.

For a moment, it held.

Only for a moment.

More darkness. More <Nothingness>, more Void. A creature got its claws into the gap, and Mercury found his mind insufficient.

He abhorred that.

Brutally, stretching himself, Mercury split his mind one more time. Three zeyjn were something he had not had for too long, but he needed more, so he made a fourth.

He made another needle, more thread, and stitched the hole in the world closed. It was needed. It demanded his whole focus. And it made him vulnerable.

More blood flowed, coalesced back into the mangled shape of a murderer. A creature made of knives and violence and white-hot wrath.

It staggered, discombobulated, but saw that hated creature. White fur with purple stripes, stained red. Abominable eyes that seemed to see everything. Arrogant, incorrigible.

Tor-Tern, or what was left of them, took a step towards Mercury. Their anger boiled so hot, right under the surface. All across the battlefield, millennium old grudges were dug up. Some buried, some deepened. Hatred flowed like liquid gold, flooding the world.

The murderer took another step. Its prey was there. Distracted, gone, occupied.

Another step.

Murder. Blood. Death. Fury.

The darkness at the edge of the world recoiled. The murderer's emotions mixed with those of the others, a bonfire so bright that for a moment, the <Nothingness> had no hold. Instead, another world enveloped this one. A thousand red stars of fury blossomed in the sky like a field of flesh-feasting flowers.

Everything grew thin. Colours and shapes lost their meaning, the world blurring into a flurry of violence and vagueness.

Another step. The murderer was above its prey now. The mopaaw was distracted, surprised at the way the fury filled the gaps. His awareness returned, he looked upon the murderer.

Tor-Tern savoured that expression. The murderer's entire existence was reduced to a single knife, to a single swipe-

Then stopped.

Mercury looked upon the pitiful remains of Tor-Tern, whom he had not killed.

From behind, a handsome humanoid showed up. Short, blue hair, a pair of glasses, and a sly smile. Misha, scion of Chill.

Their hand was coated in blood, almost touching Mercury, having stabbed through Tor-Tern.

The once-monarch went limp.

Dead.

Misha smiled. "Sorry about that," they said. "I didn't mean to get dirt on you." Still wearing that ephemeral half-smile, he withdrew his hand, shaking it a little to get the blood off. "What a ragged affair, huh? Ah. It's a little hard to talk. Do you mind...?"

"I do," Mercury said, still hardened. All four of his minds spun. "Why are you here?"

This fae was a tricky one. They had never stopped or hindered Mercury, instead being quite amicable. But he didn't trust them, not at all. Asher would have been a far more relieving sight.

As a reply, the young fae's smiled widened. "I'm doing what fae do, Mercury," they said. "Stealing." His hand opened, revealing a small, red gem. Then, in one quick motion, they ate it.

Against the Stifled Silence, a heartbeat rang out. Blood flowed. Tor-Tern's corpse, though, remained on the ground. "Ah," Misha noted. "See it as a gift. An apology, maybe? I did save your hide, so perhaps you will forgive me for my ploys. Feed it to that weapon of yours."

"What are you doing?" Mercury demanded.

"Right, right." Misha sighed softly. "I stole their mantle. I'm now the ruler of their court. But murder? It doesn't suit me, Mercury. No, no. You wanted this to be the court of lifeblood, yes? I do not mind that. Misha, ruler of Lifeblood." They smiled. "Has quite the ring to it, no?"

Somehow, Mercury felt he should be angry. That things didn't go exactly as he planned, that someone had benefited from his actions without his intent, but at the same time... Was this really an issue?

Misha gave him a wink. "I prepared another gift."

A tiny, quiet ripple went through the world.

Two more fae rulers died.

Asher stood behind the glowing shape that had once ruled Scorch. Lady Whisperblossom, for once, was between Titania and Oberon.

The faerie king's hand had gouged a horrible hole into her side, yet Whisperblossom held his heart in her hands.

"This is a coup," the new ruler of Lifeblood said, calmly. "Some fae needed to die. You could have spun them new identities, found them new names, but... well. No, I don't think that would have worked. It takes time, if they fight back, and caging a fae ruler for weeks? Impossible."

Mercury stared at the scene play out. As Asher's skin turned incandescent, the fire within them becoming infinitely brighter. He expanded, devouring the old ruler entirely.

He watched as Lady Whisperblossom's elongated, thin facade grew six pairs of butterfly-wings, as the flowers adorning her turned faintly dry and preserved, the smell of rot and desire waning for that of festering secrets.

In one fight, three fae rulers had been killed.

Oberon, Tor-Tern, and Scorch laid dead.

Whisperfall, Misha, and Asher took their places.

At the edge of the manifested dream, the domain of wrath raged on. Metallic maggots flooded in from the cracks, tearing into the ground. Mercury dismissed his dream, digging the Dream of Starvation into Tor-Tern's corpse. The weapon greedily drunk the blood and fury of the once-mighty monarch.

A maggot bit Mercury, and he felt a mark get left. Wrath. A tiny flame sparked within him, but then was extinguished by <Still Mirror>.

With a twist of his astral self, he wove the mark into a prison, not affecting him. The anger fizzled. But it served as a hint, as a guidepost if he wanted to seek out the sin's domain. And he would.

But there were more pressing matters.

"Are you on my side, Misha?" he asked.

At that, the fae smiled. It was a placid, genuine, kind, and entirely fake smile. "Sides are such tricky business, aren't they?" Misha asked. "Where do I truly stand? Do I owe you an answer."

Mercury looked at the faerie. He pressed slightly with his <Truth>. "Are you on my side?" he asked again.

The smile faltered slightly. "Yes," Misha said. "Yes, I am. I want the fae realm to last. I do not know how to be more clear, Mercury. I have given you gift after gift. I save your life, I let you strengthen yourself, I adopt the mantle of leading the court you wanted to make. I bring you Daryel to find allies against Yearning. I help you befriend Asher and Odvyne, the heiress of Blossom. What more do you want from me?"

A pause. Silence, except for scurrying metallic bugs. "Honesty," Mercury said.

Misha frowned. "I have been nothing but truthful."

"That's not the same," Mercury said. "Your schemes benefit me, but they are schemes. You involve me in your machinations. You never asked my opinion, just did what you thought would win my favour. It's manipulative." his words were cold.

The new ruler grit his teeth. "Yes," he said. "I manipulate. I use half-truths. I trick. That is what fae do, Mercury. It is what Titania has done. It is what Ciarski has done. They vye for your favour. So why am I so wrong to do so?" They stared at Mercury, then stomped a foot on one of the wrathful maggots. "Why is it so horrible for me to *try and be your friend?*"

Mercury blinked. He... hadn't seen it that way. Did Misha... have a crush on him? Were they just trying to win his favour this whole time? That seemed... strangely like the <Truth>. Not exactly, but close enough. There was some amount of admiration and hope mixed in with apprehension.

He took a deep breath. "Okay," he said, slowly. "Let's be friends, then."

The offer resonated in the fragile world, ringing out like a bell and inviting more anger in. But it didn't matter. Wrath could wait. It might have its grips in this world, but Mercury would push it aside, for now. It didn't matter.

"Gladly," Misha agreed instantly, and the thread of connection drew taut. And thus, Mercury made yet another friend.

Lady Whisperfall flew towards them on newly grown wings, soon followed by Asher. Mercury's fiery friend opened and closed his hands repeatedly, radiating terrific heat. "This'll take some getting used to," he muttered.

"Yr'enzel," Whisperfall said, her mouth twisted into a fanged smile. "Star of hope. My hope, apparently! Fihahaha!" The lady guffawed, holding her belly, then abruptly stopped, stretching out a clawed hand, almost touching Mercury, staying barely out of reach. "A ruler. Me. Would you have thought that?"

Mercury shook his head. "I would have thought Odvyne might have been a clearer choice."

Whisperfall grinned. "Oh, she would. But the princess wanted no piece of this. Freedom is further out of reach as a ruler. Odvyne is not made for that. If anything, she seems likely to wish to follow you into the mortal realm."

Another little critter bit one of Mercury's legs. He brought one of his rijn down on it like a hammer, smashing the bug into pieces. "Give me a moment. Asher, Seifes, Ciarski, keep me safe."

With that, he focused. The world was terribly frayed, torn and hurt. Each of the fae ruler bore horrible wounds. It had been a bloodbath.

Mercury had lost two ribs entirely, half of his ear had been torn off, pieces of flesh were gouged from his legs, and all the bones in his hind left leg were shattered. It hurt, but the pain was swallowed evenly by <Grief> and <Still Mirror>.

Already, his anger had dissipated. Much of the fury in the realm had been replaced with confusion. But the domain of wrath, the flower field of crimson stars, stayed.

It would vanish when it had its fill... Well, Mercury was ready to give it just that. He set to weaving.