

Chapter 203: Twisted World

The shattered space did not last for very long. Moments passed, until everything around Mercury blurred in that familiar way, though the patchwork of locations he was moving through this time made it a much more colourful experience. Bright flashes of light made him shut his eyes for a moment.

He opened them again, and the transport was done.

Around him, the landscape was strange, and twisted. The space didn't seem whole, not put together. With his bare eyes, without dipping into ihn'ar at all, he saw breaks. As if the whole thing was unravelling. In fact, he noticed... it was.

Thread by thread, the world seemed to be dissolving. The cracks were *spreading*. It wasn't a decayed realm he found himself in, not a broken realm, it was actively *breaking*.

For a moment, Mercury was tempted to reach out to those threads. He could have. Could have reached out and held them together.

But he didn't.

Mercury hardened his gaze, as he turned to see what laid all around him. He was not in a simple forest. The world was a jungle of bright colours. Towering flowers, overgrown ones right alongside dying ones, in all kinds of colours.

Pure black flowers stood next to bright pink petals, a thousand smells mixing in a disgusting, overwhelming fragrance. The world sounded like an enormous hourglass - the bits of the world that shattered with each moment were so quiet it was like grains of sand slipping through someone's fingers.

The domain of <Rainfall> around Mercury grew more dense. The smells disappeared, and their dizzying influence vanished. He had no doubt that some of these flowers were enough to drive mortals mad, but he was now made from sterner stuff than that. He took a deep breath of the fresh air he conjured himself, then stepped forward.

Around him, the jungle bent. It seemed to curve inwards to him, the space growing dense, the thin threads of reality almost seeking to latch onto him. Mercury rejected their touch though. He refused to become a nexus for this place.

It was a shame to see things breaking, simple for the sake of the loss of existence, but at the same time... He was so angry.

This was the domain of the broken thrones. The jungle bent and squirmed around him, and occasionally, the holes in reality would align just well enough that he could see it. A broken seat made for someone of great importance. It was a gorgeous, intricate seat of colourful roots and flowers.

And it was supposed to have disappeared. Like a festering wound, it clung to life. Was decay worthwhile existing?

"Is anything worthwhile?" something asked from the leaves.

Mercury turned towards the sound. For a moment, there was nothing, but then he looked more closely. It was a caterpillar that spoke to him - a purple caterpillar, with bright green markings.

It stared at him with one wide eye. Only one - because the second half of its head was dissolved into the same fracturing threads as the whole of reality. Mercury could see those wavering sparkling bits of reality, of something else's existence, stretch towards him, in the hopes of latching onto him and no longer dissolving.

"What?" Mercury asked.

The caterpillar crawled from one leaf to another. With the bits of its mouth that were left, it took a bite from a leaf, which then dissolved into puffs of purple smoke. It stared at Mercury for a long moment. "What is life?"

Mercury stared at the caterpillar. "That's a rather big question."

It let out a throaty laugh that trailed off into a cough halfway through. Then it took a few more seconds to catch its breath. "Bah. So what if it is? You can't answer even that? Some anchor you are."

"I'm no anchor," Mercury replied.

"You're mine right now," the creature said, and Mercury could swear he heard a shrug in there. "So answer me. What's life to you, huh?"

"Freedom," Mercury replied.

"An' what's freedom, huh?" the caterpillar asked.

Mercury smirked. "Life."

The creature's remaining eye twitched in a very human way. "Feckin' wise guy over here, eh? C'mon, gimme a lift already. My bones ain't what they once were."

"You're a caterpillar, do you even have bones?" Mercury asked, tilting his head.

It looked down at itself for a moment, then spoke with disregard. "Sure I do. Who's to say otherwise. I'm barely real as is. Your perception makes me."

Mercury blinked, and indeed, the caterpillar had bones. In fact, it seemed to suddenly possess a full exoskeleton.

"Ow, ow, OW!! Ya bastard, wazzat fer?" it asked. "Argh. Now my bones are *actually* old. Damn ye."

"What the fuck?" Mercury asked. The carapace was visible growing more brittle and porous, the bones aging at a prodigious rate.

"Aye, aye... Have ya never met a creature of perception before? Fecking youth of today. Lock your perception of me in. And give me back half my face, numbnuts!" the thing demanded.

For a moment, Mercury considered cruelly not doing so, but he wasn't that cruel. So, he imagined an entirely whole, brightly coloured caterpillar, and convinced himself that that was the creature he was facing. When he opened his eyes, there it was. Admittedly, a little smaller and slightly cuter, with fewer sharp bits, but it was whole.

"Ahhh, that's better. Why're ye here at all, even? Can't a man peacefully unravel these days?" he asked, still in that same raspy, grumpy voice.

"What?" Mercury asked.

"Are ye hard of hearing?" the caterpillar asked, more loudly this time. "I said to let me *unravel in peace*, fecker!" He bit off another leaf, this time turning the whole of the plant he was crawling on into smoke and tumbling to the floor.

The smoke then condensed into a butterfly that disappeared into the distance with a single flap of its wings. Mercury stared after it, then back at the foul-mouthed caterpillar. "You... want to disintegrate?"

"Yes," he said. "By the courts, yes. I wanna die. I wanna be let go. I've lived so long I forgot my own name, but someone remembers me, so I crawl on. *You* remember me, damn anchor, so I must exist." It spat.

"Why?"

"Cuz I spat in some old bastard's face, and now I'm a caterpillar for all eternity."

"... You weren't always a caterpillar?" Mercury asked.

"Oh, no, I was a caterpillar before that," he replied. "Now I just gotta be a caterpillar forever. No metamorphosis, see. No disintegrating into liquid slob and emerging freely. Just crawling around. It's miserable is what it is. A damn fecking shame. What a butterfly I'd've made!"

The strange creature bit another leaf and turned it into smoke, which then turned into bubbles, which rose into the air.

"Don't listen to that fool," another voice called, this one sweet and melancholic. Mercury turned and saw a rather large orange cat hanging from a branch by its checkered tail. "Despair's gotten its claws into him long ago."

Somehow, as it spoke, its fur rippled in an almost chameleon-like manner, the checker shifting and changing places. It went from orange and red to blue and purple, then black and white in a flash. Mercury thought he might play a game of chess on it briefly, and a whole set of pawns, knights, bishops and all the rest grew from its fur.

Its grin turned wider. "Oh, this one cares for a game." It unwound its tail from the branch, but remained hanging upside down in the air anyway. "Wanna... play?" Its grin turned wider, almost all-encompassing.

... Then, a smoky butterfly crashed into its face, and the caterpillar let out a raspy laugh. "Hah! Who's the fool now."

Meowing loudly, the cat pawed at the caterpillar, though the smaller creature was too far for its stubby claws to reach.

"Pay them no mind, they've gone mad a while ago," a third voice joined in. This one a rabbit, with blood red eyes and mottled, grey fur. It looked shabby, as if someone had rudely dragged it though an extinguished firepit. "So has everyone here. See, we're barely hanging on."

"Hanging on to *you* now. Lemme die already!" the caterpillar demanded, sending bubbles of smoke at Mercury that dissolved upon hitting his <Rainfall>. "Che. No fun."

"Now, now," the rabbit chided. "Don't be so rude to our anchor."

"He'll die soon anyway~" the cat purred. "Why not mock as much as we want?" it asked, twirling through the air gracefully.

Mercury frowned. "I'll die?"

"Yes."

"Veritably."

"For fucking sure."

All three of them instantly agreed. Mercury's frown deepened. "What do you mean?"

The cat giggled, happily and sadly at once, it spoke. "You're too real, anchor. You'll soon have this entire place collapse in on you, latch onto your threads and unravel them to preserve itself for a little longer."

"In short, we'll suck ta life outta ya, fecker," the caterpillar agreed. "Whether we want to or not."

Mercury's eyes hardened. "I can't have that," he said.

The rabbit approached, and laid a paw softly at the edge of rainfall. "I believe you do not get to make that choice," it said. "Our sincerest apologies."

"Yours, you mean, I wanna disintegrate already. Why'd you have to show up, huh? Feeding the starving? Goody-two-shoes much?" the caterpillar asked angrily.

"Ah, but you will surely prove a sweet morsel. Come, let's play a little before it's too late again. C'mon, c'mon," the cat purred. "I want you to have some memories of me before you die."

Then, there was a growl at the edge of the iridescent forest. A new creature. A medium sized, rainbow wolf with two tails and six legs. "Mine," it said, lowering its head... to reveal a tiny little top hat the size of a baby's fist.

"Come now, bigs," the rabbit asked. "This guest just got here-"

"*Mineeeee!*" it howled, lunging at Mercury - only to move very little.

Blinking at the strange occurrence, the creature jumped again, making the tiniest hint of progress. Mercury looked back at the wolf, slowly moving. He focused for a moment, and saw it. Reality was so dense around him... the wolf would have to cross kilometres of jungle to actually reach him, despite only being a few metres away.

It was already happening. This realm was falling into him.

Yet, Mercury did not feel particularly scared? How strange.

The wolf let out a long growl. "Your threads, give them to us."

"Bigs-" the rabbit started, but it was interrupted by another growl.

The rainbow wolf fixed its eyes on Mercury. "Now."

Mercury looked back. "I don't think I will."

In response, the creature growled and began sprinting as fast as it could, but all it did was comically sprint in place from Mercury's perspective, the tiny hat comically bouncing up and down on its head.

Slowly, the mottled rabbit smacked its head with a paw, revealing iridescent sparks of broken threads falling away. "How... unsightly."

The checkerboard cat twirled in the air in fits of hysterical laughter, looking from the wolf to Mercury. "He's not playing with you! He's not playing with you! He's not playing with you! He's not playing with you!" It repeated the mantra over and over as if it was the funniest thing in the whole world.

On the plants, the caterpillar ate more purple leaves, the bits of plantmatter puffing up as smoke inside the creature and blowing it up like a balloon. "Awww, c'mon. Can a man not have a meal in peace? Ya'll can piss off."

"Please, esteemed guest-"

"Come play-"

"Give! Your Threads!"

"Leave me aloneeeee-"

"**Shut up!**" Mercury yelled. "All of you! Shut up! Quiet the hell down!" His domain of <Rainfall> briefly extended, extinguishing the creature's complaints, and dousing the world in

a bit of moisture. "I'm not doing anything. I'm not following or playing or giving or killing *any of you*."

The broken realm around him, the entire jungle with all its fraying, breaking edges seemed to flinch away at this statement. The animals looked at him quietly, warily almost.

Mercury looked around him, at the menagerie of creatures he'd attracted simply by virtue of being too real, apparently. "Where is the seat of the broken throne?" he asked.

"Bah. Dead fer ages. Ya won't find-"

"*Where?*" Mercury asked again. He felt the rage bubble forth in his mind. "They called me here. For a treasure hunt. So there better be some treasure, or I'll start hunting something else."

A brief silence, until the cat laughed. "As mad as us! Chikikikikiki! You're as mad as us! Chikekekeke!"

"The throne is broken," the rabbit said timidly. "It has been for decades."

"If that monster were still around, you'd be a speck of dust compared to it as an anchor," the wolf growled.

Mercury stifled his own growl, and simply turned cold. The collapsing reality began to feel heavily up against him. He took a step forward, dragging the entirety of the jungle along with him like a shackle. "I'll show you." Another step. "I'll get the fucker."

The anger was truly boiling now. The broken thrones - one had hurt old Uunrahzil. If there was even a small chance that it was the dead ruler of this seat... Mercury wanted to tear it down with his own hands.

"Whoa, whoa!" the caterpillar started clinging to the leaves as if it was on a swaying ship, the cat tumbling through the air around it. "Slow it down there, anchor! Jeez!"

Despite the complaints, Mercury took another step forward, dragging the frayed threads of this realm with him, as all the iridescent colours of the jungle buckled and blended against the edge of his <Rainfall>. The world turned from real to an impressionist painting.

Rather than a consistent place, everything was warping, folding in on itself, in a mess of colour and space. Mercury took a step forward, dragging it all with him - and then he saw the throne buckle and move away, too.

Inacceptable.

Tuning out the ramblings of the animals, Mercury dove deep into ihn'ar, piercing the first veil of gold, then the second veil of iridescence. Suddenly, all the breaks were so clearly visible. Every sneak of colour at the edge of his domain was another disintegrating thread. Every bti of this realm was rotting away.

Yet it still existed, hanging on, consuming other threads into its weave to barely reconstitute itself. It was disgusting. It was akin to what the crimson sun did - a starving dream that drew in those who dared utter its name in order to keep itself living for another second, another moment.

This place, too, was the same. Clinging to an old ideal that shouldn't be around anymore. Mercury saw it now. This realm, at its core, had once been the court of *Joy*. It was not the throne he was after, but it was similarly despicable.

It wanted to keep existing, and was trying to unravel him into itself. But that was a bad call; Mercury, after all, had absorbed a nexus before. He was not only more complete than this place, he was also more *real*. His desires were greater when pitted against this world at large.

At the end of the day, that's all a dream was. A desire. One that could be moulded and shaped by one's will... and Mercury had a pretty strong will.

He reached out with his paws, sticking one out of his domain. Instantly, the realm tugged at his threads, seeking to unravel him, but they were wound too tightly. Instead, he reached out to the weave of this place himself, in the gap between the <Nothingness> where he found its <Dreamweave>.

And then, he <Severed> it.

Within an instant, all the colours frayed, a gash carving through the tunnels. The animals stopped their chittering and bickering. The treads that bent against his domain aimlessly hung for a moment, then tangled into themselves.

Mercury stepped forward, through the entirety of the realm, and appeared in front of the broken throne.

He was breathing heavily, his head hurting, but the noise of the wind was silent here. The creatures of this place were behind him, now utterly silent. The clearing around the throne had dense threads of reality, clinging on more tightly than any other place in the jungle, but they were still fraying.

It was a decaying monolith to what once was.

"Show yourself," Mercury growled.

The threads of reality danced and rearranged themselves. The entire jungle unravelled in a moment, the blurring smears of colour condensing into the broken throne, mending the cracks in the root-chair for a moment. A thousand flowing bits of rainbow light wove through the silent clearing.

And a prismatic, refracted eye opened in the middle of the chair. It was gorgeous, and looking at it made Mercury want to laugh and dance. It was like looking at a glass house on a sunny day, a rainbow within a rainbow within a rainbow, a thousand refractions in beautiful, multifaceted patterns all in on itself, painted two-dimensionally on the chair.

It hurt to look at.

Mercury stared at the ruler of what was one Joy. "You are part of the treasure hunt."

The eye blinked in agreement, and Mercury's heart nearly broke for a moment when all those colours winked out. He grit his teeth, fighting desperately against the foreign sensation.

"Give me the treasure, and let me leave."

The eye blinked in amused disapproval. He would not find any treasure here. He would not leave here, either. Joy desired to spread joy, and Mercury knew he would love his stay-

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

Some of the hold of joy slipped, and Mercury growled. His mind was his own. He would feel happiness when *he wanted*. A prison, no matter how pleasant, was still a prison. He would never be a bird in a cage.

The eye blinked, and Mercury could no longer grasp its meaning through the weakened mental connection. All the realm's weight bore down on him, now. Demanding that he want to stay.

Every fibre in Mercury's being strained to refuse. He wanted to- he would *hate* staying! But it would be- It would *not*. He raised his barely healed stump of a leg to his mouth and bit down on it, the pain rocketing through every bit of nerve tissue he had, sending tears into his eyes.

There was no joy there. "*Let me go!*" he demanded.

No response.

"I demand it. On the grounds of Hospitality," Mercury said, pain and adrenaline washing through his system.

Then, there was a flash, and with it the smell of rot. Faerie queen Titania stood in front of the iridescent eye that had apparently grown vast enough to eclipse the whole sky.

"A first visitor must not be harmed."

Her voice droned heavily, and Mercury began bleeding from his ears, nose, and eyes, thin streams of crimson trickling to the ground.

The eye blinked.

Titania's eyes blazed with bright purple, the smell of ozone and simple power soon overpowering that of rot. "You twist the rules. You twist hospitality. Pay the price."

The eye blinked.

"You have no right of refusal," the queen hissed. She reached out and tore away the eye's lid. "You have no right of existence." She broke off a part of the mandala of colour that built up the eye. Suddenly, there was no more 'red' in the thing. "You have no right-"

The lidless eye blinked, sending the queen staggering back. Her form twisted for a moment, and the once-graceful queen let out a twisted, animalistic growl.

Mercury's world went to silence, as his eardrums ruptured. The world trembled, and the shadows fell apart, taking away another bit of his perception. The mana in the air itself seemed to burn away. He could feel it, the energy being vibrated and becoming different, a flame of magic.

"The courts-"

The eye blinked, interrupting the queen, and sending a wave of overpowering heat over Mercury, burning away bits of his fur. Acrid smoke filled the air, only to be washed away a moment later.

"You would twist time like this? You would-"

Another creature appeared next to the eye in the sky. This one was restless, evershifting, and unimaginably cruel. It seemed to be a writhing mass of shapes and forms, entirely incompatible with this world they found themselves in. Mercury's eyes bled more as he beheld the thing, and he could feel his mind want to fray.

The ruler of *Truth*, a second one of the broken thrones. He knew it instantly.

Titania growled again, feral and furious. Her shape was changing, becoming... different in an indescribable way.

What did Titania mean, twisting time? How much time had passed while he was in the jungle? What-

The air fragmented. Right in front of Mercury, it lit on fire.

Against his singed fur, this one felt warm. Comfortable.

Talons at the end of a scaled hand pierced through the rift in reality. Further ahead, Titania, halfway through her bestial shift to the incarnation of Blossom's wrath, paused and turned. The rift expanded, the scaled hand grabbing onto its edges.

A second hand came through it, and *pulled*.

"Who dares invade the fae realm?!" the queen cried.

Mercury barely heard the words, only picking them up as the air in his <Rainfall> vibrated. But when the rift in the world opened further, he began to hear something entirely different.

Ta-Thump.

A heartbeat.

Ta-Thump.

A draconic maw, clad in fire came through the rift. A red-scaled behemoth, two sets of enormous wings on its back, and four legs, thick as tree trunks slammed on the floor. The creature's neck was long and massive, each fibre of it screaming of power.

The red scales glistened brightly enough that they could shine even in the lightless, worldless void. A massive, fire-wreathed dragon stepped into the fae realm.

Ta-Thump.

The dragon's heartbeat was loud enough to shake the ground they stood on, a roaring engine of power.

Zyl, in his true form, gazed at the rulers of Blossom, Truth, and Joy one after another. Mercilessly, he spoke. "It has been three more days than promised. Which one of you kept him from me? Answer, so I can *kill you*."