

Chapter 256: Cleansed with Blood

And so, a little over a year passed.

Mercury collected another 100 Skill points from <Skill Point Generation>, and the Skill levelled up once more. Some things happened.

Bael, against all odds, built a vacation house in Stormbraver. About half the council members fainted from the news, and one of them had a heart attack, but it was nothing that couldn't be treated by a little bit of Lucia's flame. Did she maybe set them on fire more than necessary? Debatable.

Most of the time, she set Mercury on fire when she was angry, who didn't mind too much.

Ruvah and Breeze became closer friends. Zyl became a better painter. Avery robbed just one bank, to buy out a half dozen bakeries. Did it cause some trouble? Yes, but it was also really funny, so Mercury didn't rat him out. Lucia and Iris went on a prolonged mission to spread the word of the church that was most certainly not a honeymoon.

And that's about all that happened. Perhaps there was more to say, but then, Mercury simply lived. Every day he ate breakfast, lunch, and dinner. He shopped for groceries and cooked his own meals. He laid in the sun, he meditated, he learnt more of magic, and he pushed himself.

Just the regular amount of pushing himself, really. He didn't sleep, since he didn't really need to, and he kept his minds active. All *five* of them, now. Getting used to living with multiple instances of focus active was a little bizarre, but the multicasting aspect of it was fun. He'd tested that in minor duels at the mages' guild.

Now, was it fair of him to crush a few children in magic duels? Probably not.

All of them did have years more magic practice than him, to be fair! He just had other advantages. Like a vastly more powerful mind, and <Grain of Infinity>, which meant he practically never ran out of mana.

All he needed to do was throw a dozen spells at each of the powerful ones that the mages cast, and that usually solved his problems. It was a little funny, to see some guy in robes with

a wand hold out a single, dense magic circle, only to have half a dozen bloom into existence in the air behind him.

That was another thing about magic that was funny. Most spells originated from within a mage's aura, so most mages summoned the spells on their hands, or right in front of their wands. Mercury, though, didn't really have hands. So, he just summoned them wherever.

Keeping control of them got harder if he started the cast far away, but his reach for spell starting points was rather large. He could even summon them behind other mages for a really rather mean trick. Or surround them with spells from all directions, which usually made their attacking power meaningless.

Of course, there were still people who could give him trouble. Esmeya and Akuhl were both leagues better mages than him - both in terms of elements they had access to and their mastery over the discipline. There was a type of duel that Akuhl favoured, especially, called "counter-magic". It was a discipline focused on stopping another mage from casting by disrupting their magic circles.

And, somehow, she still absolutely trounced Mercury in that, despite all his advantages.

But, he learned. He even picked up a skill related to it, <Counter-Magic>, and a few levels in that. He got better at crafting too, improving his woodworking and smithing, but he didn't put an incredible amount of time into it. A lot of time was dedicated to just being happy.

Yes, that meant doing things he enjoyed. It means spending time with people he liked, too, and to a smaller degree, it meant travelling. He'd done a few smaller trips, mostly into the mountains. He'd also taken a bath in Zyl's lava-lake that he'd made in fighting Bael. By now, that had crusted over, but Mercury had made a hole in that crust to take a swim. Because of *course* he did.

That little stunt eventually netted him another level in <Tempered Body>, and he made it out hale and hearty. The lava was a bit sticky, though, so he used <Rainfall> to wash the solidifying stone out of his fur. It was a funny sensation, that. The intersection between his storm and solid earth, and watching the way that the rocks were pierced and worn away into liquid.

Mercury also took up a bit of farming.

It was, really, a silly and vain kind of thing, but he wanted to try his hands at growing his own foods. So, he took a sufficient plot of land outside the city walls. He could, of course, have

made the garen in his inner world, but Kim was already doing just that, and Mercury wanted a more hands-on experience.

So, he tilled the soil, dragging a plough with his ghost-hands, put seeds in the ground, watered them with his <Rainfall>, and beckoned them to grow. He even learned to infuse some of his stamina into the ground - a bizarre feeling that took a while to get used to. Expanding that vitality, letting it resonate with the plants, then drawing it back in was almost like a rhythmic dance.

There was not too much to show for it quite yet, but he'd grown a couple squashes for his and Zyl's own use at home, which was nice.

Day by day drifted by, and Mercury kept himself busy. Relaxation, by now, looked rather amusing, since even at his quietest, parts of his mind were tinkering away at spells, at all hours of the day. There was a truth there he wanted to find, and he was slowly seeking it out.

But none of those activities were what alerted him to when things would change from his state of rest. That was something else entirely.

<Tapestry>.

His newest Skill, and one he made sure to practice enough. He activated it every evening, making sure to look at the threads in his surroundings, trying to check that nothing too terrible would happen. A few times he saved construction workers from falling bricks, or old people from slipping on stones. It was enough that seeing him had become a bit of a symbol of good luck.

That same intuition about his surroundings alerted him that a big change was finally coming. A big change that he did not want anyone else to deal with. Mercury sighed, shook himself a little, and rose out of bed.

Except, this time, Zyl was not just content to let him go.

The dragon sat up at the same time. "What're you doing up, Mercuryyyy..." Zyl said, rubbing his eyes, looking at Mercury while suppressing a yawn. And there, he must've found some answer. "Ah," he said. "It's time, then?"

Mercury smiled. Then, with a ghostly hand, he squeezed Zyl's palm, and helped pull the dragon out of bed. "It is," he said. "They'd knock on our door tomorrow."

Zyl groaned a little, and Mercury huffed out a laugh.

“Y’know, for being so all-powerful, my dragon darling, you sure are a sleepyhead.”

At that, his boyfriend grumbled. “Excuse you, mister multi-mind. Unlike some of us, I’ve got only one brain. My heart can pump as much as it wants, and it will not change the fact that I am made for sleeping on mounds of gold for decades as a big lizard, alright?”

“Now, now,” Mercury said. “I only have one brain. It’s asleep right now. This little meat-suit is being piloted by the entirely uncoupled five parts of my mind that have thought themselves into existence.”

“Dang dream magic,” Zyl grumbled, slipping on some travel ready clothes instead of his pajamas. “Dang reality bending. All I do is set stuff on fire really well. But noooo...”

Mercury snickered at the jabs. “It’s okay, Zyl. I can’t turn a mountain into lava the way you can either.”

Smiling smugly in a way that flashes his small fangs, Zyl nodded. “That’s true.” Then, he put on some travelling boots, tying them shut properly, and took a final, deep breath. “It’ll be a bit ‘till we see all this again, won’t it?” he asked, quietly.

“Yeah,” the mopaaw agreed. “It will. But that’s okay. You’ve got your bed inside Logston, right?” Mercury asked.

Zyl snickered. “You just wanna see me crawl into the tree.

“It helps,” Mercury said with a smile. “Are you sure you don’t want me to pack some powdered beans?”

“No,” the dragon shook his head. “You’re growing tea in that inner world of yours, anyway. I think I’ll try that for a little while,” Zyl said.

Mercury smiled, gently. “Then, I think I’m good to go. You all packed up?”

For a moment, Zyl called up his inventory again. He checked the slots, making sure they were filled with all the essentials. A backpack being shoved into a single slot was really rather helpful, they found, and so, there was not much more that they needed than what they already had.

A couple last minute items, like toothbrushes and some snacks, and they were off.

“Who are we meeting, actually?” Zyl asked.

Mercury smiled faintly. Then, he spoke, quietly. "Envy."

Lucia stood at her window. It was evening, the sun having long since gone under. She was about to head to bed, when.

"No. Way," she said.

Iris appeared next to her with a breath of a shadow and a passing whisper. "What? Oh."

It took her only a moment to get the situation. Her face remained entirely neutral, as if her lips didn't know whether to curl upwards or downwards.

"I'm gonna set him on fire," Lucia growled, stomping to grab her travelling gear. "I'm gonna set *both of them* on fire."

Gently, Mercury tossed another pebble against the window. He had the audacity to wave at them with excitement. The motion looked awkward, since he didn't have arms, but it was unmistakable. Lucia ground her teeth, clenching her fists, taking deep breaths.

Opening the window, Iris spoke. "Good evening, Mercury. What seems to be the occasion?"

"Envy. They're near," he said with a somewhat awkward smile, trying to get the news across gently.

The fire froze in Lucia's veins. Her expression faded from amused anger into one of cold cruelty. She grabbed her travelling gear, and hopped out the window. "Off we go then," she said.

Iris joined them wordlessly, a moment later.

The four of them walked through the night. It was a reasonably bright night, in late autumn. Valiantly, the leaves in the forest clung to their trees, blocking the moonlight as the crew wandered forward.

It would look as if they had a destination in mind, when they really didn't. Mercury simply was very good at seeing, and at listening. The <Tapestry> whispered in his ears, every gust of wind rustling its resonant threads, sending chiming vibrations out through the web.

Resonating with it, Mercury didn't even need to know where he was stepping. He could walk with his eyes closed, and he would hear a hum if he was about to impact a tree. All he needed to do was follow the closest thread to Envy. It was not too hard; after all, Envy was a heavy, large thing that had an important connection with almost everyone from the group.

So, following that hum was pretty easy. Mercury even found himself humming along as he strode through the forest, leaves crunching slightly beneath his paws. It was chilly, but with <Hydration> working to keep him warm, he didn't feel it at all. All he could feel was the faint noise of fated music.

The rustle of wind in the breeze, drawn along by what pushed it, interconnected events that would happen, could happen, and definitely wouldn't happen. Even now, on collision course with Envy, as he heard the threads sing, Mercury felt secure. Iris, Lucia and Zyl were with him, so there were rather few ways that he would die.

Instead, he listened, and walked along a path only he could see. Following that invisible thread that connected every living thing. That tied together all of reality to shield it from the void, and that interwove with the <Dreamweave> as a secondary layer of reality. Connections were everywhere if you knew how to look for them.

Mercury breathed. The pull got stronger. He felt a storm brewing, the <Tapestry> shaking. It chimed and hummed in high and low notes, and it felt a little like pushing two magnets closer together. Eventually, they'd reach critical distance, and something would happen. It was only a matter of time, only a matter of space, just a few more steps and-

They emerged into a clearing. It was far away from Stormbraver. Over a day's march at normal speeds. Yet, at the same time, it was somewhat close. It was a nameless little puddle in that forest that glimmered with silvery light in the moonlit night. And, next to it, sat Otto.

Otto, the third walking disaster, long-time friend of Zyl and Lucia, and sworn friend of Mercury, too. He looked at the newcomers.

His skin was cracked, suffused with bolts of lightning worming their way through it like rivers of lava. Tufts of fur and scales covered his extremities. His fangs had grown, and he still looked burnt and charred. His head was bald, the hair of it long singed away by the mutations.

By every meaning of the word, Otto looked like a monster. Like a nightmare amalgam made flesh. And despite that, when he saw the others, he just smiled, brightly.

“Ah! Zyl, Lucia, Mercury, Iris! It has been long time. You well?” he asked.

His voice was deep and rumbled through the silence. Zyl went to greet him first, wrapping the other man into a hug. Lucia stepped closer to Iris, protectively. Mercury looked at the third party at the lake.

Otto was not the only one there. Across from where Mercury currently stood was a group of people. They looked entirely ordinary. Men and women, humans and elves, mostly, wrapped in dark cloaks of many thin layers. They fluttered slightly in the cold wind, turning their shapes hard to discern.

Blues, purples and greys blended in with the night sky, making the strangers look like formless faces - how amusing, that, given that they were faceless.

A shiver ran across Iris' back. “It's them,” she whispered.

One of the people in flowing garments turned to look at her. “Ahhhh,” it said. “The Black Ivy. So you return to us after all this time.”

Mercury frowned, faintly. “Drop the facade,” he demanded.

“Facade?” a woman asked, tilting her head. “But this is who we are. Faces that are rightfully ours,” she said, smiling faintly.

Their voices were melodic. Too-perfect. They already got on Mercury's nerves. Iris simply stood, frozen, eyes wide. He took a deep breath, then the Storm's Raiment stirred. The cloak around him steamed and boiled, until a thin sheet of clouds enveloped his side of the lake. They wrapped around Iris, and he looked at her. “Do you want to be fearless?” he asked.

For her part, the ex-assassin swallowed heavily, then nodded. Mercury let a sleet of <Rain> fall over her, and some of that terror washed away. Not all of it, of course, but it was a reminder. A simple <Truth>.

The past was distant. The present was different. Iris breathed in for a long, long moment, then pulled her eyes away and went to hug Otto, squeezing him. Lucia stood by Mercury for another long second. "Can you tear off their false faces?" she asked.

And at that, Mercury shook his head. "No," he said. "I am not here to be cruel. I'll kill them, probably. But I will not provoke their envy on purpose."

Lucia ground her teeth. "You want to be kind to monsters?" she asked.

"Yes," Mercury nodded. "I know they have been cruel. And I will make sure they never hurt anyone again. That is all."

"Fine," the priestess said, walking off to Otto.

The avatars of Envy, meanwhile, simply sat at the opposite end of the lake. They eyed Mercury. There was some suspicion, and yet, a begrudging respect, as well as a tiny bit of fear. He felt the static in the air, the mistrust, the way that they skinstealers stared at him.

And despite that, he turned his back.

Mercury walked to Otto, greeting the big lug with a ghostly fist bump. "Good to see you Otto," he said.

The giant of a man returned his smile. "Good to see."

"Did it take you long to get here?" Zyl ask, patting him on the back.

Otto shook his head. "No. Jumped."

At that, Mercury tilted his head. "You... jumped?"

"Yes," Otto nodded seriously. "Very fast." And that was all he said on it.

Mercury smiled. He'd missed the big guy. "What've you been up to?" he asked.

Smiling, the giant opened his inventory, and pulled out a chef's hat. "Per- pursuing cooking. Extracting more from parts." With very slow, gentle movements, he placed the hat on his head, almost reverently, making sure not to tear it. "Mercury want meal?"

"Not right now, but I would love one later, Otto," he said. For a moment, the big guy's face fell, but then lit right back up. He moved to pat Mercury on the back, then paused.

"You not enjoy touch," he said, as much to remind himself as others. Instead, he just gave a big thumbs up.

"Are you quite done?" one of the avatars of Envy hissed.

That interrupted the small round of smiles. The quiet of the night fell back over them like a heavy, suffocating blanket. The threat of violence hung heavily in the air. There would be bloodshed, almost certainly, and everyone present knew that. It was just that everyone Mercury had brought deserved their pound of flesh.

He turned to Envy again. Slowly, the clear evening seemed to grow cloudy. "Yes," he said. "We're done. Let's talk, then. What do you want?"

"Everything," one of the creatures hissed. Its human mask slipped. The face distorted, the features melting, the skin knitting over the mouth before ripping open in a mass of distorted flesh.

This was the same skinsteaders who had raised Iris to be an assassin. Who could take others' shapes and replace them. They could do so because they envied others, so they desired to take from them, and the system allowed them mimicry and theft abilities.

After all, that was the tricky part with Envy. It was greedy. And yet, there was nothing wrong with the emotion itself. Really, it could be flattering. Giving someone gender envy was a rather nice feeling, Mercury thought. Heck, even Omori, the ancient one of the court of Shadow, wanted nothing more to be human.

So, Mercury respected their desires. He would not tear off their faces, because doing so would be a lie. When the skinsteaders stole a face, it did become theirs, quite literally. They would identify with it. They could only steal things they truly wanted.

"Why steal?" Mercury asked. "Why not recreate? Learn?"

"It's never enough," another hissed. "We take and we want more. Always more. The need does not disappear."

Lucia scoffed. "And what of the rest of Envy? Are they all pitiful bastards like you lot?"

The monsters chittered and hissed at her. It was... sad, Mercury thought. He felt the first touch of <Grief> again, at the sight. The way that they wanted something they lost in the act of acquiring it. They envied everything and everyone, and so, taking just one identity would never be enough. Forging their own lives would never be enough.

But despite that, eventually an answer came. “No,” one of the skinstealers sneered. “The others are worse. We live here because we escaped. Because we clawed our way out. All we want is humanity, and life. The others...”

It reminded Mercury of Yearning. Of the way Ul'den'tyrel had been before Mercury reincarnated it into Uldyrel. He caught glimpses of the realm of Envy - and the way it differed from the others.

Envy envied itself. It was an inward twisting abomination of betrayal and theft and backstabbing. There was no one to trust, no one to rely on, not one whose company was enjoyable. Every single person was closer to perfection than anyone else, and the only way to advance was to undermine them, to ruin them and take from them.

There was a maelstrom of violence and gluttony and lies. It was a truth everyone knew, that hatred and deceit were but a game they played. The egalitarian court of silks was only equal insofar as everyone despised each other.

Because how dare anyone be better than oneself?

In front of him, Mercury found those who were simply lost. Those who'd escaped. Those who were cruel, driven to commit atrocities, and yet they paled in front of the real monsters. He took a deep breath, and shut the <Tapestry>. He let his ihn'ar fall away, the veils closing.

There was a simple question he had to ask himself.

Were a bunch of skinstealing assassins driven by their endless envy, their desire to become even a little closer to being human, worth forgiving?

And he found a simple <Answer>. A simple <Truth>. It was not his decision to make. He'd not been hurt by them.

“Iris,” he said gently. “Point at the ones that need to die.”

Her eyes shook, then hardened. Slowly, she raised her finger. At the end, Iris, too, was a brutal, violent killer. And yet, she had been hurt by these twisted people. Mercury would untwist the ones whose sins were lesser. But those who'd done too much? Their blood would be spilled.

At the same time as Iris pointed, she drew her dagger.

And the sins were cleansed with blood, before the rain could wash them away.