

Chapter 248: Anger Overflowing

Mercury, now a level 1 Lumyron, opened his eyes.

With the efficiency of his stats having doubled, he felt much stronger than he used to. Mercury could feel himself existing in the colosseum as well as in the steel forest of wrath itself. He wore a silver crown, and black, liquid metal was wreathed around his legs.

The Dream of Starvation had drunk from Tor-Tern before, and was hungry for the blood in the colosseum. Meanwhile, the Stifled Silence rang with <Grief>, flooding the metal forest with liquid silver, silencing the cries of fury from wrath.

Both versions of Mercury stepped forward, the gilded Drcoleather Cloak draped over his back and billowing slightly, and the Cloudmatter Shawl wrapped around him.

Inside his chest, there was a <Grain of Infinity>. It bubbled and boiled, ready to be used. He fed its power to the <Stifled Silence>, just to see what would happen, and his silver crown roared in response. It soaked up the power easily, and the wave of liquid metal that spilled forth from him redoubled in intensity.

His willpower already made it an enormous thing, a sinister flood that soaked into the ground and ate away at the metal, that soaked up the fury that permeated this place and reduced it to nothing. But with <Grain of Infinity>, it turned into a veritable storm of silver. Instantly, the area it filled expanded, more than tripling in size. More and more silver spilled forth, turning the world quiet.

Trees made from knives and needles were swallowed entirely, and when the wave receded, all that was left behind was a smooth, mirror-polished sheet of metal under his feet. It was so flat, so flawless that Mercury could see the sky of glittering stars reflected in it. It was a polished, calm surface like that of his own <Still Mirror>

Mercury took a step, and the liquid rippled for a moment, then stilled again. As he moved forward, the sphere of perfect silence moved on with him, but the result remained. Where his <Grief> passed, the metal was stripped of violence. The trees were gone, and the animated creatures that would try to devour and kill anything that stepped foot in this realm were gone.

They didn't even give him an exp, since they weren't really alive in the first place.

Gluttony at least was a place where real things could live, if only to devour one another. Wrath did not. All it needed was fury and violence. Nothing was needed for perpetrating that other than death. Every single creature within that realm was an extension of its anger, destroying anything it invited into that realm.

And so, it was flattened.

Wrath had bitten off more than it could chew. Mercury refused to bnd to the fury, and even the infectious light of the stars, trying to drive him mad in anger, was simply swallowed into his <Still Mirror>. He felt the lake of that Skill growing more and more as he used it to swallow up the anger, but it was fine. His mind was strong, and he refused to be shaken.

So, he took another step, leaving a quiet, still land behind.

Meanwhile, in the colosseum, blood rained down. There were thousands, millions of creatures, having been trapped and killed over the chapters. Each one had been infected with unstoppable fury, forced to fight and die and bleed, forever.

A soldier swung his sword at Mercury in a desperate, violent movement. In response, the mopaaw swung his front paw. An invisible line of <Sever> streaked through the air and, backed by Mercury's stats and enhanced by the Dream of Starvation, cut through the sword and bisected the whole man.

[Killed an Infected of Wrath. Get: 500 Exp, 50 Gold.]

In the middle of the motion, his upper body separated from his lower body, cut in two at the waist. The dream of starvation drank the blood before it could hit the red sand, and the corpse of the soldier dissipated, devoured by the angry arena, set to reappear from the sand somewhere else down in this realm of violence.

More creatures charged at Mercury, things that had once been people with hopes and desires, reduced to puppets of violence. And for each one, he moved one of his legs, cloaked in dark grey, hungry steel, and killed them.

Sometimes, when they fell, they looked afraid. For those, he cloaked them in his <Rainfall>. The wind, for a moment, carried their fear and fury away, and let them die in peace, just once. For just a few moments, they would not need to fight, until the sands took them and forced them to fight all over again.

But then, the rain also fell on the sand, and washed away the blood. Teeth and splinters of bone were ground into dust, no longer stabbing into his feet, and the red was turned back to yellow-white as he walked forward.

Whenever his paws came down on the tainted ground, though, they ate at the blood by themselves. The Dream of Starvation had become more powerful, and as it had, it also grew hungrier. After drinking from the fae realm, it was now more than happy to eat into the essence of this angry place.

And so, whenever he killed, the Dream of Starvation ate again, more essence flooding into the dull metal, giving it a red, almost demonic sheen as it grew ever so slightly, enveloping more and more of Mercury. Very slowly, it climbed up his legs to his shoulders.

He could feel its hunger, too, through their bond. But then, it was a quiet, insignificant thing. In truth, the dream was just an item, one that was bound to him, and not one that would bind him. Even its hunger was just a simple knowledge that he could make it grow stronger by feeding it, but cutting with it.

In this place of violence, then, there was no shortage of things to cut.

Mercury simply did as he always did, and walked forward. Bodies dropped around him, men and beasts falling into the sand. Some were larger, towering things, tough things, but Mercury cut them all the same. <Sever> was enhanced by <Grain of Infinity>, too, feeding the skill power. And Mercury was stronger than any of these infected, and that was the <Truth>.

So, each attack found its place, and if one was not enough, he simply cut again. His stamina was dropping with each strike, coursing through his muscles, but that was fine. He had enough of it, especially with the tiny bit of infinity within him rushing to refill that well of power.

Really, for this place, Mercury was unstoppable.

It was meant to grind someone down bit by bit. Throw a hundred, a thousand, a hundred thousand bodies at someone and break them, bit by bit. To infect them with anger and wear them down until they get devoured by this place's unending fury, turned into another puppet.

And it would *never* happen with Mercury.

Each droplet of violence that fell onto his <Oceanic Consciousness> was cleansed away, and his mind returned to a <Still Mirror>. He had two of his zeyjn controlling both bodies of his, and two more resting, ready to cycle if needed. The rare times anything came close enough to actually harm him, he still had Juno to protect him, as well as his defensive Skills.

His body was woven by his mind. Even as the world tried to wear away at him, the coarse sand was turned fine, and needle-like grass was flattened into a calm ground. He felt wrath buck and rage against this indignity, throwing more and more bodies at him, but it would never be enough.

Attrition simple wouldn't beat Mercury.

Calmly, he looked to the sky, at the myriad stars of pinprick fury, and asked. "What's your <Answer>, then?"

And the sky started shaking.

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When Mercury demanded a reply, it was inevitable one would come. He felt the rush of his abilities, and snapped at wrath. Demanded it to simply face him in combat.

There was only ever once possible answer, though.

Violence.

His demand for battle was something this place of fury answered easily. Turns out the stars in the sky were not just decoration. As he asked for wrath's reply, one of them fell down from there.

The red star streaked through the sky and slammed into the silver next to him, cratering the mirror surface the steel forest had taken.

A champion of wrath rose from the wound on the world. Mercury felt the fragile reality of this place tremble under it, and he saw the way the threads of the world bent around it. Wrath's plane, this forest, was made from a hundred tiny nexuses, each one wrapped in strings, woven into one another.

Now, one of those nexuses stood in front of him. A colossus of steel, a twisted abomination meant for violence and murder. It was a thousand swords, grafted into one another to shape

limbs. Twisting steel, wreathed into horns and claws all over, each limb a sickle, each movement a slice.

The air hummed as the thing moved, a towering thing twice as high as any of the trees. It was a monster, and as Mercury looked at it, the thing screeched. The roar was piercing, more like the noise someone might make when being stabbed through the stomach. Mercury nodded slightly.

It was a reasonable answer.

In an instant, the thing was upon him, a thousand sword blades barrelling towards him. The thing knew nothing of form or skill, simply relying on brute power, supported by the system. The air hissed as it moved, and a monstrous blow came at Mercury's face.

There was a crack as it broke the sound barrier, but Mercury didn't hear it - after all, the Stifled Silence forced the noise to disappear. A wall of quicksilver came up to meet the attack, slamming into the gigantic monster, only to be sliced apart by the aura of sharpness it exuded. Each knife cut about a meter out from it, carving furrows into the ground and making the giant whistle as it moved.

Mercury slammed his rijn into the blow, which took a cut, too. He felt a knife grind against the edge of his solidified mind, but it failed to cut, leaving a simple furrow on the malleable sheet of invisible force. But he did knock the blow aside, making the creature stumble and burrow into the ground.

The winds started howling a moment later. Rain fell. The drops were split when they hit the creatures, but halves of raindrops were simply more more rain. Just the same, they fell through the monster.

Some droplets split a thousand times, cut on infinitely thin bits of magical sharpness, spreading like a faint haze, but so what? There were hundreds more drops falling from the sky, and some burrowed into the thing anyways. Its violence was formidable, but it was no storm.

With another scream of iron grinding against iron, the thing threw itself forward again. The rain carved holes into its body, but those didn't stop the violence. Mercury shoved it with his rijn and <Force of the Hecatoncheires>, but it simply pushed past that, too, cutting the invisible force, and giving him a phantom pain in fingers he didn't even have.

Then it reached him, and raked a claw across him.

[<Tempered Body> has levelled up! <Tempered Body lv. 1 -> 2>]

Blood splashed out - only to be instantly frozen by the Stifled Silence. The crimson liquid slowly was drained of colour, until it was silvery and metallic, like everything else in that world.

Mercury frowned slightly, then focussed his will. <Shift>, <Hydration>, <Tempered Body> and <Resolution> triggered, guided by <Medicine>, mending his body. The wound closed like a clap of someone's hands, the flesh simply closing up against itself, woven shut by silvery threads that disappeared a moment later.

"Huh," Mercury said, the pain gone in a moment. "How strange." It was a little weird, being able to mend his body with just a twist of his mind. But since he got cut, maybe he ought to take it a little more seriously?

<Sever> activated once more, this time enveloping his <Rainfall>. The Storm turned furious, slicing winds joining the raindrops. Each one that touched the thing sounded like a clash of blades, or, well, it would have sounded like that if there were any noise. But in the aura of the Stifled Silence, the clash was quiet and muted.

All that Mercury heard was a gentle breeze against his skin, quiet quicksilver waves on his paws.

The roaring flood of brutal waves and slicing winds that tore the monstrosity to bits went unnoticed.

He simply blinked, and watched the thing washed away with the wind.

Again, he turned to the sky, cocky. "Is that all?" he asked, demanding an <Answer>.

The stars started to rain.

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In the colosseum, Mercury was being exposed to a similarly rigorous fight. The crowd that was content to watch jumped from their seats and flooded the arena, trying to get their claws on him. But here, he didn't even try to toy with them. Here, he was stronger than outside.

Because the colosseum was a dream, a thin gossamer realm stacked on a flimsy foundation. And so, he didn't hesitate, and used <Unravel> instead of <Sever>.

Bodies stormed him, incarnations of perfect fury, hosts of wrath that had been chosen and elevated as its ultimate guardians. Then, they fell apart in front of him.

One after another, they came apart. Angry, vengeful specters, simply dissolving into a mess of component strings, then let go of. He didn't weave them back together, didn't remake them, Mercury simply took their tapestry apart, then cut the threads in half.

Thus, they were undone.

A warrior who had won over a thousand battles, wielding an axe as large as himself, simply dissolved from his feet upwards. Stumbling, crawling across the sand as his legs disappeared, until his hands, too, fell apart into disparate strings.

Those dissipating threads were scattered in the storm of his <Rainfall>, washed off the reds of anger and violence, stripped from the infectious desire for pain, and left clean. Like shirts having their colour wrung out. In a way, it felt a little bit like recycling.

Taking the fabric of those who had been killed and made into tools of war, and undoing them. Those disparate threads would go on to do... something, probably. Maybe strengthen the weave of this dream in general, since their reality would instead feed into this one's. Or, of course, there was another option.

Mercury activated his nexus, calling the threads to himself. That brightly burning star that anchored his inner world started to glow, greedily tethering more threads to itself. He fed it white gossamer, made from taking apart people who should long since have laid to rest, and he hoped the Caretaker might approve of it.

These people's stories had been over for a while, forced to go on in perpetual anger. Now, they didn't need to fight anymore. It was the best mercy he could give them, because he couldn't wash the anger away when they were still in a human shape, and he couldn't put them all back together.

In a way, it was sort of similar to what happened to Kim, his gardener, made from the disparate threads that the remaining servants of Joy had been woven of. Except, this time, the dissolution was more complete.

Mercury sighed a little. He could consider the ethics some other time. In truth, he was simply killing these people and then using the remains of their corpses. Really, it was more like burning them to ash, then using that ash as fertilizer. There, that was an analogy he was fine with.

So he continued to burn them down, grinding them apart with rain as he took their threads and unmade them.

Sometimes he'd even take those threads and lay them on the ground in front of him, just to make sure the world didn't break apart as he walked. It was almost meditative, and he found himself easily slipping into ihn'ar.

He watched as the golden veil of reason was pulled aside almost by itself, making the nonsensical entirely mundane. He watched as the iridescent veil of reality parted, showing how flimsy and ephemeral this dream within a dream really was. And he brushed up against the third veil again, catching glimpses of threads that weren't threads at all, ones that shouldn't have existed.

Threads that weren't even part of anyone or anything. Ephemeral things that lead from somewhere to somewhere but had no substance in and of themselves.

And then they'd slip through his mental fingers like the loose sand underneath his paws.

He sighed, softly, and let it go for now. He didn't have the processing power needed to try and smash through that veil, or decode what those threads meant. He'd get there in due time. For now, all he needed to focus on was simple, and almost pure in that way that fights often were. He had to find the centre of the colosseum and take down its source, the origin of all this anger.

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Steel and silver danced. One choked the other, wrapping around it like a snake. Tendrils of liquid metal, crawling up titanic bodies carved from sharpness and violence. Stars fell, crashing into the lake, and yet, the earth remained calm.

The violence blurred into one. Thick fury ran over the land in swathes, and Mercury could feel the steel underneath his feet vibrate. The very fabric of this realm laid in anger, in hurt, in pain. It wanted to rise up as blades and cut the flesh of his feet apart. It wanted to drink in his suffering and drive him mad with fury.

But Mercury's soul was calm. Even as more and more and more violence mounted, it all fell into that lake, the <Still Mirror> that sat at the centre of his being.

Fury fed into the lake like an everlasting stream of red. Like a crimson rain, drop by drop falling, disappearing, and growing still once more. But then, it didn't end, and Mercury could feel the lake start to swell again.

It was a bizarre feeling, that for the first time he was stretching the limits of his Skill. It had almost gotten to that when he was burning himself alive and using it to simply make the pain disappear, but this kind of fury was worse. It was infectious. The red drops tried to turn that entire lake red, even as the Skill resisted it.

But, at the same time, it was excellent practice for the Skill.

Mercury leaned into it more actively, devouring more of the fury, even his innate one, until he felt himself grow calm. It was a shaky, unsteady calm, and he fed the lake even more. He let himself be cut, feeding it pain, feeding it disappointment, feeding it with his own <Grief>.

And that last step, finally, made it overflow.

Liquid silver flooded the <Still Mirror> of his mind. Burning red anger twisted and churned in those waters, and they boiled over the shore, the lake's surface rippling.

Emotions bubbled forth and Mercury felt the fury actually grinding against his mind for a moment. But then, He focused. <Still Mirror> was never a Skill for suppressing emotions, it was always one to accept them and let them go.

He took a breath, he saw the anger and the grief, and he gently took them, and let them drift away with the flood.

[<Still Mirror> has levelled up! <Still Mirror lv. 9 -> 10>]

[<Still Mirror> has met the necessary qualifications for evolution. Evolve? (800 Skill points)]

Slowly, he smiled, and, slowing down his perception of time with <Oceanic Consciousness>, he confirmed the prompt.

[Evolution confirmed. Engaging. Please pick an option to evolve the Skill into. The price will be the same (800 Skill points), no matter which you choose.]

[1. <Babbling Brook>

2. <Numbing Apathy>

3. <Reservoir>]

[<Babbling Brook>: Offering the most straightforward path of advancement, this Skill allows your inner tranquility to grow. In addition to the still mirror lake, there will be a brook, flowing to and from it, bringing any troubles to be cleansed, and sweeping them away easily. You may remember them, and cycle your emotions, and you will process them more easily and completely. Find peace within yourself.]

He liked this one. It suited him rather nicely, he thought.

[<Numbing Apathy>: Emotions wash you by. You are able to isolate and discard them, leaving yourself empty of trouble. Apathy is unending, and will take anything you throw at it, grinding it down to dust. Choose whether to keep your mercy. Numb yourself when you must.]

This one seemed a little extreme. Apathy was certainly... useful, he supposed, but it also seemed annoying to deal with. A mismatch to his personality. Mercury liked feeling joy and belonging, and sometimes he even wanted to feel sad. Becoming numb wasn't his path.

[<Reservoir>: Your lake turns into a reservoir, ready to grow when needed, and empty back out. Any emotions stored within can be unleashed, on yourself or others. Let them feel the pain you've kept quiet for decades. Let them unearth what lurks underneath the water.]

Menacing, but again, not for him. Mercury did not need more ways to inflict pain or fear on others.

Smiling softly, he picked <Babbling Brook>.

[The individual has acquired the Skill <Babbling Brook lv. 1> through Skill evolution!]

A river opened up in his mind, and he felt all the fury drain away with ease. The still lake grew calm and tranquil again. Fury passed through him and was carried away downstream, disappearing in the distance.

He breathed in deeply, smelling the scent of rain and metal and blood being washed away.

He breathed, and opened his eyes. Mercury faced wrath, took a step, and let the world quiver as he began to break that anger apart.