

Chapter 265: Respite

The portal to Sloth was different from the others. They had all been invasions - violent attempts to take from this world and bring to theirs. To feed and gorge themselves on things that did not belong to them. Violence, theft, hunger.

Sloth was not quite like that.

Mercury stood in front of a thin, purple gate. It was lazy, like a scraggly pencil line no one had bothered to erase. It was small and thin, and yet, it stood open as an invitation. It was just big enough for him to fit through, as if whoever drew it couldn't be bothered to spend more than minimum effort.

And so, Mercury stepped through. For a moment, reality blurred and bent around him. It curved and shrank, and he felt the cold touch of the void for a second. Whoever made this had not been particularly skilled at making rifts.

It was over a moment later, though, before he could feel any adverse effects. He, Juno and Ruvah all appeared within the realm of Sloth a moment later - and found that it was dark. They were too lazy to create a sun, or even a light switch.

Not that that stopped Mercury from seeing. He was perfectly capable of taking in the entire realm of sloth and found it was... dirty. The ground was covered in discarded waste. Apple cores, empty boxes for takeout, discarded plastic cups for drinks - why did they even have plastic?

"You dreamt of it," came the <Answer>. Which was strange, because Mercury hadn't asked. Especially since he was in the domain of Sloth, where no one should reasonably be indulging his answers.

"I am forced to," the voice replied meekly. Mercury looked down and found... A rat.

A rat.

Buried in the piles of garbage that laid about this realm was a single small rat, with sleek grey fur, covered in leftover pizza-grease, its little eyes focusing on him. Mercury regarded the thing for a long moment, then sighed. "So you're Sloth's avatar?"

"Yessir!" the rat squeaked.

"Why?" Mercury asked, and <Answer> thrummed.

The rat squeaked softly, but the words came easily thanks to Mercury's Skill. It told the thing what he wanted to know, and how it could best phrase it, made the sentences tumble out.

"Sloth's avatar is always the weakest in the realm. Any who are stronger are lazy, and don't want to manage it. In fact, I hate this job. I will be passing it on as soon as a weaker manifestation than me appears!"

Mercury glanced at Juno, who gave a kind of half-shrug to the best of her ability. "So then, why did Sloth open a portal near me?" Mercury asked.

"Obligation and invitation," the rat provided helpfully. I quickly scurried up higher on the pile of filth and laid down on it, remaining just a little below Mercury's eye level. "You are connected to the sins, so Sloth rolled towards you. And perhaps, you would like to laze about here, too!"

He blinked. Ruvah's tail flicked with mild disgust. Mercury took a look around himself again, taking in the piles of trash that made this place look more like a landfill than anything else.

"Why would I?"

The rat blinked. "Why wouldn't you?" it asked. Of course it wouldn't understand. It was a creature of Sloth. All it wanted to do was laze about. Sleep and rest. He could see that it didn't wanna answer his questions either, but then, he could also feel the stronger avatars of Sloth.

Much, *much* stronger.

Somehow, there were multiple presences in this world that made Mercury shudder. They loomed in the distance, buried under mountains of trash, hogging all the warmest, comfiest spots in this filthy darkness of theirs, doing nothing. Helping no one, but at the same time... doing little harm.

Not *none*. Sloth still forced its weakest members to work for them. It was a laziness that caused a kind of cascading pyramid of command, but... they also made mostly small requests. Bringing more pizza here and there. Or sodas.

"Ah, yes, sodas!" the rat said, taking note of his gaze. "We thank you, great soda-dreamer, for this wonder. You were the first to conceptualize drinks so perfectly suited to doing..."

nothing! Such indulgence! So little drinking to be done, and so much nourishment! We can lay about without moving for longer!”

That was the deepest truth of it all. Sloth didn't want to move. It went against its nature to speak, to do anything. All this waste was just made to sustain itself, mostly off of its own dreams. Slothlings wasted their dreams, and consumed them in the form of... trash. This was just the residue.

It was both the most pathetic and most terrifying sin Mercury had encountered.

“How long have the oldest been laying immobile?” he asked, carefully.

“Oh, since the start of this realm, really,” the rat replied.

An entire world's time, spent doing nothing, gorging themselves on their own laziness. The worst of the worst. But sloth, when applied to oneself, was ultimately not that bad. Frankly, with how lazy those leviathans were...

Would they even defend themselves if he were to kill them?

“Did you make this rift?” Mercury asked.

“Yessir!” the rat said. “Made it the best I could.”

That was the largest lie Mercury had ever heard. “No,” he said. “You made it barely functional.”

“Yessir,” the rat replied smugly, as if bragging about an achievement, instantly dropping the lie. It was too much effort to keep it going, after all.

Softly, the mopaaw let out a sigh. He brought a ghostly hand to his face, dragging it across. He was dealing with lazybones, here, the laziest of lazybones. People so obsessed with doing nothing that they'd push others around to feed their basic needs, and nothing else. They required no houses, little sustenance, but they did not even want to chew.

They were little more than static funnels for their most bare essentials to be turned into more mass. More power. In a way, it was stunningly efficient.

Creatures of laziness gorging themselves on their own success, slowing the advancement of those others by forcing them to do more. The harder they tried, the slower they grew, so they were forced to give up their dreams. Feed their ambitions to Sloth.

It left them pointless leviathans. Giants with power that Mercury envied, and *nothing* to spend it on, other than longer breaks in between feedings, perhaps. In that, Sloth was the most terrifying of the sins, because its avatars fed everything to it - their future, their potential, their personalities. All that was left behind was husks with everything being stripped away.

Sloth granted power at the very condition of not using it. Mercury sighed again. As with Envy, this sin's greatest avatars were also its greatest victims. They embodied it, thrived on it, and suffered it.

He looked at the rat in front of him, the one that had done a shitty job on purpose. It couldn't do a good job, that would go against its nature. There was nothing it could do but the bare minimum, and frankly, even that was almost too much. It had to be forced into that by things that were even more lazy than it.

"What's your name?" Mercury asked.

"Patrick, sir," it replied easily and quickly, aiming to finish the conversation as soon as possible.

Mercury took a long moment to take it all in. The greasy fur and beady eyes. And he sighed, softly. "Would you like me to remove your connection to Sloth?" he asked.

Instantly, the rat's eyes bulged in terror. "Uhhh, please don't," Patrick quickly replied, scurrying backwards into the trash, as if that would save it. "It's a pretty sweet gig we got! I just wait around for someone new to pass the directory onto, then I start lazing about for as long as I like."

And that was the real problem, wasn't it? That it was too easy to do nothing here.

The difference between rest and laziness had never been quite so lovingly highlighted to Mercury. Everyone needed to rest, to heal, to relax and unwind. But this wasn't that. These people had not been under pressure, they simply languished in their own filth and rotted away.

No growth in their personhood. No interests, no skills however small. When Zyl was overwhelmed he gardened, he painted. There was none of that here. Sloth refused its inhabitants even that base right. As they fed off themselves, it burned them down to the marrow of their existence, to the bleeding bits.

Every wish and dream had to be pulped, turned into shrapnel and fed into the machine that demanded they spend just a little more time languishing. He finally learnt what he disliked about Sloth. It took away the fight, the struggle to live and breathe and express oneself.

Mercury took a deep breath.

The world felt a little more quiet next to him, as he considered. The creatures of this realm would never want their connection to be severed. This was, after all, like a drug. It was easy, it was even pleasant, perhaps, but it caused a slow atrophy of their minds and selves. Was it right for him to rip that away?

Of course, the additional bit of trouble was that, even with its impact being less than the other sins, Sloth still was a parasite on Chronagen. He could feel the fabric of the world, and the way that this pocket gnawed at it. This realm of piled up trash and discarded bits of waste was pressing down on the mortal realm as a tower of filth.

And yet, just breaking it all didn't feel like an adequate decision, either. Yes, he'd done that for the other sins, but those had felt less grey than this one, with less wiggle room. Sloth did cause problems, everyone in this realm was a parasite. And yet, they were willing perpetrators and victims both.

He sighed and shook his head. "Ruvah, what do you think I should do with this?" he asked.

"Stagnation is death," the elemental said calmly. He looked towards the distance, towards where the mounds of trash moved in rhythmic breathing, Mountains of filth shifting and swaying, the things buried beneath them not even bothering to unearth themselves. "If these were people once, they have already died a small death. When water stagnates, someone else must help it find a channel. Can you?"

Mercury tilted his head. Ruvah, then, thought that this was stagnation, and that they needed help. To languish without purpose is languishing too. What purpose could Mercury give them? Where would he need to draw the line between healing and decay?

With a soft tap of her snout against his fur, Juno made herself known too. "I believe that there is more to this. There are aspects of Sloth that are useful, that don't need to be eradicated."

He nodded slowly. That much was true here, but it was also true for the other sins. With Wrath and Envy, he hadn't put much thought into it, since there were... few things to

preserve. Wrath might be useful sometimes for people who were too timid, and Envy could perhaps be a compliment in the right scenario, but... Well.

It wasn't as clear as here - where some people probably deserved to relax a little more. Mercury had known others who worked themselves to death, hell, he'd done so himself, in a way. So he felt that there was less inherently terrible about Sloth.

Other than the degradation of personhood and the soft parasitism he saw in this place, of course.

Those were the two problems he really had to solve. The impact that this place had on people's personalities - the way it was addictive rather than healing - and the fact that it drew from resources back on Chronagen. This realm, like the others, was still a weeping wound on the world, after all, and Mercury had to stitch it shut.

With a gentle sigh, he sunk into ihn'ar. The colours of this world drifted into each other, and its threads became stark in his vision. Sloth was shaped like a snare, he found. A mousetrap with a tasty morsel, drawing them in, ensnaring them, and then parasitizing them. It was an exaggerated, cruel type of Sloth, and that was something he did mind, he decided.

"Uhm, sir, what are you doing?" Patrick asked. The rat seemed a little scared all of a sudden as it looked at Mercury's eyes. There was probably good reason for that - the clouds that usually hid their depth had faded away, and the mopaaw's eyes had turned into windows that revealed his true nature.

Weight pressed down on this rotting world, and the piles of rubble shook. Mercury's will reached out, gently, brushing its sides. "Digging a channel," he said calmly, "without ruining the lakebed."

Stagnation was death. He could, and reasonably should, do something about that. Now the question was one of how to solve it, because for once, Mercury really didn't feel like killing the avatar and absorbing this pocket realm into himself.

In part because frankly, fusing his garden with piles of trash felt a little too much like littering.

The amusing thought brought a soft smile to his lips. At the same time, his mind brushed against the <Dreamweave>, following Patrick's connection as an avatar, as the very nominal ruler of Sloth, back to the core of this world.

It was easy at first, but then progressively got harder, as he found that he just kind of... didn't want to. What was the point of anything, after all? The world would end someday, so it was all pointless. He should just give it a rest, lay down and take a nap or something.

Or something?

A storm wove into being around Mercury. It was made of snow and shadow, of rain and wind. <Rainfall> cloaked his will, washing away the insidious influence of Sloth.

Mercury quickly shook his head, water beading and pooling around his legs. That had been the strongest mind-effect of any of the sins yet. In part because it aligned better with his nature, that he did sometimes feel like things were pointless, but even beyond that. It was terrifyingly powerful, since it had been able to even affect Mercury.

But he didn't want to languish. He wanted to live life to the fullest, to chase his own happiness over and over again. That was the <Truth>, and the infection of Sloth died against it.

His mind split, processing more things at once, and Mercury's ethereal grip quickly expanded along this realm. Rain fell all around him, washing away some of the filth, letting it sink into the budding rivers and disappear as their depth disintegrated it. Empty cups and plastic straws, paper bags and pizza cartons, oily residue and human waste, all of it was simply turned to nothing by the rain.

Staring at this place, Mercury took it all in, and he began to follow each thread, understanding each of the connections that made up this realm. With each knot he undid, another truth wrote itself into the world. And each one was uglier than the last.

As the veneer of disgusting filth was washed away, sloth was revealed in its totality. In the sad ways that it hooked into people.

Sloth was hopelessness. It was the languid knowledge that nothing would ever matter, it was a lack of confidence, it was a permeating pointlessness that whispered of sweet release. A promise that it couldn't fulfill, because it only perpetuated its own causes. Sloth, at its truth, was a trap. A hook with sickly-sweet bait.

An excuse to not participate in life, a farce that demanded decay. He understood why Patrick was so desperate to hold onto it now; because the poor thing was terrified of being left alone. That being bereft of apathy might ruin the world to them, that they might be hurt again.

It was so much easier not to disappoint when no one expected anything, after all.

Mercury saw through all of that and more. He saw the languishing leviathans, and their connection to Sloth's innermost principles. How they held so much power, and yet had decayed their selves. Their stats were unimaginably high, but they had no Skills, no abilities to wield them with.

He breathed and cast his rain on them, too, the storm expanding, bit by bit. Sloth, the realm, howled at this. But it had been understood, so the feeble attempts at defense were meaningless. Its champions did not want to fight, after all, so all it could do was attempt to throw its weakest at them. Ruvah and Juno took care of that.

After all, Sloth was powerlessness, and without embodying it itself, it could not inflict that on others. It could not rot if it was not a host to all the rot itself. And Mercury wanted to change that last part.

Just drawing his storm across the realm did much. The trash began to vanish, and the decay began to slowly clear. An unblocked stream for a stagnant lake. But that, by itself, would not be enough.

This place could not exist without its parasitic relationship with the world and its people, it could not exist if it wasn't fed the dreams, aspirations and desires of its own inhabitants. Without sacrifice, without willing decay, Sloth was pointless. If Mercury washed it all away, the place would simply crumble.

And that would be a shame, because despite everything, Mercury saw a bit of himself in it. He firmly believed that rest was important, and that far too many people were horribly overworked. But, with how the sins worked, he had an idea.

The underlying mechanic, the thing that made them a wound on the world was their parasitic relationship. That they found the worst, and fed their worst attributes. That they swallowed up the best and degraded them into empty caricatures of themselves, filled with only one thing.

But this time, Mercury didn't just wanna destroy the realm, he wanted to change it. He wanted to try something. And so, he <Unravelled> it. Not Patrick, not any of the people in this place. He reached right to the core of Sloth itself.

Instantly, the world balked at him. It wanted to resist, to stop him, but then, Mercury's weight crashed down on it. And he was, simply put, stronger. He had devoured three sins

already, and grown his dream-garden. Sloth was older, yes, but it was defined by laziness. A mismanaged, poor imitation of a world is what it was.

So, it raged. It fought and bit and raged as Mercury touched upon the very idea that this wound on the world was wrought from. It thrashed in his grip, and dealt minor wounds to his will that didn't truly matter. Mercury's mind was iron, after all. This place was suitable to him, yes. The temptation was stronger.

But in that, he was also suitable to changing it.

Mercury's <Truth> manifested. His world pitted against Sloth. His ideals against its.

There was little finesse in that clash. One was a raging beast, thrashing while sleeping, and the other one was a tempered mental savant.

<Truth> was Mercury's most evolved Skill. It utterly *crushed* Sloth. All the experiences he had made, everything that Mercury was crashed into the world of laziness, wrenched its nature open, and unveiled more of its network. He used his knowledge with brutal efficiency. <Unravel> as the method, <Tapestry> to know where to strike, and his own <Truth> as a hammer.

Yes, it was fine to be lazy. Mercury truly believed that, so he hammered that into Sloth. It was fine to relax, and be kind to oneself. But the cruel laziness, the kind that came when it involved nothing of joy? When relaxation was stripped of its purpose, and became a simple method for flagellation, to avoid engaging in anything worthwhile in a self-fuelling cycle?

He cut it out.

Sloth screamed. Its second layer unveiled itself to him. Beneath all the filth and trash, when he peered into the heart of what it was and changed it, Mercury found out what Sloth was made from.

Traps.

It was a realm of fish hooks and mouse traps. They dug into his flesh, into his mind, and strained to pull chunks off him. Smaller bits that one wouldn't miss at first, to keep them scrambling back for another bite, another morsel of apathy at the cost of just a little more of what made them a person.

Sloth was finding comfort at the bottom of a bottle, it was abandoning happiness for the sake of apathy, it was shutting out anything and anyone that might be worthwhile. It was a series

of small sacrifices, of small things that were supposed to make it easier, and that just made the hole deeper. A staircase, turning into a slide, into a bottomless pit.

And Mercury seared that shut.

Hooks dug into his flesh and pulled off chunks from him. Fine, so what? He grew them back. They sunk into his mind, and pried at his thoughts, but he simply thought more. His will was not so easily damaged either, so half the time, the hooks broke instead of him.

Mouse traps slammed shut on his paws, steel bars aiming to separate them from his body, and Mercury snarled. He wove himself in <Grief>, in <Rainfall> and in the Dream of Starvation. Layers of metal encased his body, and suddenly, the hooks didn't bite into his skin as much anymore.

Sloth recoiled at those, especially. Juno and Ruvah watched it all, closely, and somehow... they helped. His wolf sunk into his shadow, and hummed, quietly. It was a sad song, and Mercury could feel the resonance it had with his <Grief>, with their shared loss. It turned his sea of silver a darker shade of pallid grey, and yet, it stood strong.

Even in grief, they didn't give up.

Ruvah, by comparison, enhanced his <Rainfall>. It turned from a downpour into a torrent, water fuelled by the elemental's magic. They were so tired of being powerless, after all, so the storm suited them just fine. Drowning the world was better than languishing for a moment longer.

And thus, Mercury smashed his will into Sloth again.

His <Truth> was wielded as a hammer. It slammed into Sloth over and over, shifting its meaning, its definition, and the boundaries of where it began and ended. He shut certain bits of it off entirely, cut them out. Fish hooks with their lines cut, addictive bait burnt away by bolts of lightning and forge-fire.

He fought and wrestled for what felt like hours, toiling against an opponent so similar, yet not quite right. His head hurt from the impacts against his mind, and his body ached from where metal had dug into him. Frankly, Mercury really just wanted to take a nap... but the work wasn't done.

That's when he first fell into rezil.

When he wished to take a nap, and the world wanted him to, as well. The two of them were, for a moment, aligned in purpose. They resonated.

The weave of this world-wound hummed in response to Mercury's wish, as if eager to grant it. Yet, he was still filled with the desire to work. His will was still being wielded.

And so, when Sloth was shaking, when they had come to half and accord, Mercury's mind slammed into it with the intent to rearrange. Humming threads, already moving, were turned malleable. The world, once so rigid, was suddenly as if made to be molded.

It was as if he'd finally taken an ingot and heated it up. Freshly pulled from the forge, he could finally shape it, compared to when it was cold.

The resonance shook with the blow, but Sloth shifted, too. It changed, and became aligned to Mercury's <Truth>. A million small changes all at once - and each of them made the world resonate with Mercury some more. It shook violently for a moment, then calmed. Another hammer-blow of his rijn remade so much more of it, while his ystir held the important threads in place.

Moments passed in the blink of an eye, and with a third hammerblow, "Sloth" was no more.

The fish hooks had been cut, severed, molten and recast. The trash had been cleansed away in flowing rivers. The weave of this place had been entirely turned inside out, in a brutal way, and this world-wound's heart had been reformed until it wasn't even a wound at all, anymore.

Mercury smiled at himself, gently. He liked what he'd done with the place. He took a long breath, and sighed. "Alright, welcome to Respite," he said, checking over each thread again to make sure they worked, and they did.

He'd inverted the seeking mechanism. Instead of preying on the vulnerable, it would seek out those who needed a little more sloth rather than those who had too much, and offer them some solace.

Instead of being a filthy dump of rot and stagnation, Mercury had turned it into... a spa. A pocket world that had indoors and outdoors hot springs. Managed by the cleansed leviathans - who had mostly assumed the shape of rats.

Rats who wore very cute little vests and spectacles. He snickered a little at the sight, seeing some of them also relaxing in the hot springs, and sighed softly. Then, he laid down and took a nap.

Because surely, he'd earned some Respite, too.