

Chapter 260: Incandescence

Breeze did not enjoy the feeling of the wind.

There was something about it that felt so unnaturally freeing, so easily cruel. It made it easy to forget. To get lost. To run and run and run and break everything in its way.

Now that he knew what to look for, the feeling was *uncomfortable*. Not because it felt wrong, but because it felt so *right*. And Breeze hated it. He hated the way he revelled in it. The way that his body unravelled, coming apart into wind and violence in a seamless transformation. How he felt his will spread out in the breeze, how he felt the crushing weight he could bring to bear.

For so, so long had he ran away from everything. Now, all he needed to do was run at it. The problem was remarkably easy, it was literal child's play. He just needed to play tag with the embodiments of Envy. And so that's exactly what he did.

In a long, shifting moment, the wind stirred. A breeze appeared where there had been none. It was a lurching terror that it brought with it, a shifting of fate as the wind started to move. And then, the Breeze became a storm.

There is something strange about wind. Something that is so omnipresent and pleasant, and yet terrifying when it becomes vast. It's the same thing as with fire. As with the sun, as with darkness.

Humans are made to feel safe around these things when they're small and tame. When they make us feel in control. When a cool breeze comes by in summer and wipes away some of that suffocating heat. When the darkness is a simple shadow on a bright day, rather than the creeping horror that could hide any monsters.

And there is a fear that comes with things that are too vast.

When Breeze moved, humans felt scared. It had been a whisper of a storm, a regional thing that picked off individual people, but that was no longer the case. What descended on the world of Envy was more than that, a raging hurricane of violence and uproot body parts. The world made of arms came undone in a single breath.

Body parts constructed of thoughts and desire were uprooted like weeds, torn into the sky and shredded to bits. They came apart into their barest essentials, breaking and tearing and breaking all over again. The winds were so violent that they refused to abide by anything within their domain.

Breeze's tornado tore into the ground like a drill, scattering the facsimile of body parts, spreading them around in a mess of tangled limbs that could make any crime scene jealous. It tore and broke at the world that was trying to take. The wind revelled in the destruction, in the very momentum of it all.

And that was the most disgusting part of it. The fact that it enjoyed it all. Every moment, the storm moved forward. The unending desire for movement was, after all, far greater than the fear of destruction or loss. It flew like a caged bird being released for the first time. It escaped the confines it had built, the body of the mortal boy, and the spirit that had caged it began to disintegrate as well.

There was, after all, nothing more important than freedom. Nothing more important than movement.

The storm did what it always did, what it always had done. It ran forward.

It tore and broke anything and everything in its path. Envoys, skinstealers, reduced to shrapnel. Skin and flesh flayed from their facsimile bones, melting and reforming to find a shape that might save them, might keep them coherent, but there was none. Bodies shattered into tatters. Ragged bits of skin that might, at some point, have been something resembling a person.

And then, it found an attempt at caging it.

Bones and limbs sprouted and grew into towering, writhing structures. Things that would break the wind. Things that would slow it down and hold it tight, things that were *not allowed* where it reigned.

Crashing into the flimsy defenses before they'd fully formed, the tornado broke them, too. They fell apart against the depths of its hunger for movement, sacrificed to its desire for more. And the strangest thing was that it knew the trees simply wanted to be like it.

They, too, wanted to move. They were jealous of its majesty, of its speed and unbroken might.

How disgusting.

For the price of coveting the storm, of trying to cage it, they would die. One by one, this fake landscape of twisting towers and hungering hands shattered. Their fake, reaching branches of hands strung together into garlands were torn apart. Long strings of limbs, arms with hands on both ends clasping each other, tore off into the sky.

Like whips, the garlands cracked. Their hands held each other still, even as they wove through the sky, turning into razor sharp wires. It was almost intimate, the way the hands held each other, and it would, perhaps, have been lovely in some twisted way, if they didn't simply want to ride the coattails of the storm.

For a brief moment, Envy knew what it was to fly.

Then, those strings of hands were turned into lethal garrotte wires as they spun.

Long bands of limbs struck against structures, and both parties shattered. Bones that sprouted to form arms broke, scattering shadowy flesh to the wind again. Towers and cage bars were torn apart by swinging effigies of a different part of their maker. Envy was trying to steal the skin of the storm.

To cage it and become part of it and subsume it all at the same time.

The garlands broke against the buildings, but then took their hands. Long chains of limbs fluttered in the winds, holding hands in a string of lovers' embraces, and attached themselves to structures that writhed and regrew where they were torn.

Broken bones regrew like trees, splintering off into branching trees of skeletal tissue. Flowers of hands sprouted and ossified and sprouted again. They broke and shattered and regrew like each finger that it tore asunder was a new seed of a different plant. It was like a living catacomb weaving itself into the storm.

The chains of limbs danced in the tearing winds, but still they held. By pure desire and theft, they held. They tried to halt its momentum, grinding at it with structural strain and whipping force. The living cage expressed its desire, and the system answered.

Against those sprouting chains of calcium and collagen, the storm raged. It tore and broke and shattered. It could feel the way that more of this realm coalesced on it, that the desire was drawn in by its violence. Against this rage, what else was there to Envy? What could the world want except this violence?

With that envy, more chains grew. They whipped in the winds, long and longer series of arms, tangled up into swirling knots of themselves, tangling up the winds. The storm roared at its newfound cage, loathing it after having just broken the old one. It wanted to be free. It wanted so very desperately to do nothing but move and shatter anything in its path.

And yet, it found itself slowing. In a disgusting twist against its nature, the copying interloper, the facsimile of it, was stealing faster than it could. A tangle of writhing limbs that stole its momentum, faking the storm with flailing hands.

It could feel it, the way the cage drew tighter, like a noose around a human's neck.

The way that the momentum was choked from it, the way its life faded.

And then, it felt another storm at the very edges of its existence.

Mercury walked forward.

He walked at a slow, measured pace, as the world around him shrunk and shifted. Beneath him, the ground of hands was thinner than ever, as the world itself seemed to coalesce in on where Breeze was raging.

Slowly, Mercury tilted his head. Could he still consider that tornado to be the same entity as Breeze? Had the boy lost himself in the storm? Or was this what honesty was like? Dropping all his filters and melding with his underlying desires, being true to them.

At that thought, he smiled slightly. Were filters dishonest? That was what the question boiled down to, and Mercury didn't think they were. Being in control of himself was very important to him. Being honest was also important, but people he was close to deserved to have things said kindly, even when he was angry with them.

Another step carried him closer, the wind now brushing his fur. It waved gently in the Breeze. This was the outskirts of the storm, the part where the tornado was reduced to a gentle caress, making strands of his mane wave in the wind. It was almost comforting.

He stepped forward one more time. <Itinerant> carried him a dozen steps at once, space itself giving way to his movement. The wind tore at him, then, like a grasping hand trying to whip him into the air. Mercury manifested his Strength stat, becoming denser. He willed <Itinerant> to keep him on the ground, travelling downwards in defiance of the storm, despite having no reasonable way to do so other than his will.

Another step carried himself deeper into the storm. The winds went from tearing to ripping. He could feel the roots of his fur straining against his skin, the way his joints were being pulled. Mercury breathed. And took another step.

The whole world was wind. It was so loud he couldn't hear himself think. All of it was a terrible, angry momentum. Everywhere around him was suffused with speed and motion in a singular, forward-facing rage. It was struggling against a cage and whipping even harder, like a beast in chains.

Mercury breathed. He let calm settle over himself and unfolded his <Rainfall>.

From within him, another storm grew. It was different from the wind, but he understood that storm, too. He and Breeze were friends. He knew what the <Wind> was like. And he asked it to calm, for but a moment.

All the rage within Breeze evaporated at that.

The second storm didn't come to usurp it or steal. It was a different kind of wind, a calmer, focused existence compared to its movement. The winds slowed for a brief moment. They calmed, coalesced into smaller swirls, local ones.

Chains of limbs stopped whipping through the air. The hands kind of fell by the wayside. The thing they were stealing, mimicking, suddenly didn't exist anymore. Like a broken promise, the grasping limbs hung in the air for another moment. Reaching out with desire for something that wasn't there anymore.

A raindrop fell on the soft earth.

And it did his soft earth, surprisingly. Because the raindrop didn't stop. It broke through the earth, through layers upon layers of calcified theft, of hands holding onto things that had never been theirs, and it reached the very bottom of this realm. It fell through the lower boundary of the realm of Envy, and reached the mortal plane, where it fell against dirt.

That was a bit funny, since Mercury thought it would need to cross the void first. Then he remembered that there were still hands reaching down there and plucking pieces of Stormbraver away, extending through the threads. His raindrop had simply slid along one of those connections, of interpersonal understanding, and reached the ground.

Regardless, a thousand more followed it.

Hands that were woven into garlands suddenly were pierced. The storming winds coalesced into whirling sphered, thin discs that spun and gathered speed, then rapidly decompressed, turning into slicing pieces of destruction.

Chains were severed with a calm, methodical approach. The cage was washed away like a bad memory, focussed winds tearing into them and shattering the bars with ease. And when they toppled to the ground, the rainwater washed against them, turning them into nothing but debris.

A moment passed, as Envy tried to go to war. More and more of the realm dragged itself here, growing thin on the fringes, the half tether melding with the mortal realm, bits of grass and trees showing through the gaps in the world. There was, however, one more problem.

Those fraying boundaries of the world also opened up gaps to the void.

Instantly, Mercury summoned the Stifled Silence. Raging winds quieted to a whisper. Amber dashed forth and filled the gaps, moments before that <Nothingness> could come inside, and Mercury drew the world in closer.

It was a bizarre sensation. He'd never directly tried to take hold of someone else's world while it was alive, really.

Well, that was a lie. He had taken hold of others' threads while alive. He'd done it for *people*. And, in a way, this entire thing was just an expression of what Envy was. A domain, or a body, or a corpse in equal measures. And there was one advantage he had, here.

Envy was burning.

On the other side of the world, Zyl had donned his crown, and one half of Envy was on fire. So, Mercury *pulled*.

With his minds, he grabbed the strands of reality, and drew them in tighter where Envy bordered the void, and kept them loose where it fed back into Stormbraver. He saw Bael and

Avery quickly shepherding people through those gaps back onto the material plane. And then, he focused.

He focused as Otto stepped next to him, among the torrent of water that poured harmlessly of his skin, and the giant of a man let out a long, steaming breath. "How do I help?" he asked with a grunt.

Mercury smiled softly. "Give me some lightning to work with," he said.

Otto smiled. "Can do," the big guy answered. For a moment, nothing happened. Then, Mercury saw those veins running through his cracked skin turn bright with energy.

A hissing crackle and the smell of ozone spread through the air. Tendrils of lightning reached out from Otto, striking down any of the grasping hands with soft crackles in the enforced quiet of the Stifled Silence. Thunder was turned into a dull growl, more akin to a wolf's snarl.

Which is precisely when Juno emerged from Mercury's shadow, and carried off a human child that had wandered a little too close, taking the boy by the scruff of his neck. "No fair!" Elliot complained. "I wanna see, too!"

Of course, the wolf cared little for his protests, simply slinking off and carrying him aside.

More crackling energy suffused the air. It fed into the clouds as the Storm's Raiment billowed into them. It was carried along the gusts of wind, bizarre swirls of tearing electricity being stored. There was something building. A charge that was yet to be unleashed.

Mercury waited patiently. His rain kept the defenses of Envy aside, kept it disarmed and tame. Breeze and Otto stored the power, they built a storm of gigantic proportions. Lightning was pouring out of the dragoneater in billowing streams of power, crackling softly in the air. They coiled and crawled, slowed and contained for now.

Electricity that made Mercury's fur stand on end poured into the air, and then more and more of it gathered still. Otto channelled an amount of energy that was enough to level all of Stormbraver, probably. Mercury felt it, smelled it, saw it and heard it. He could taste the static on his tongue, and watch the ribbons of yellow and blue circle through the sky.

A heartbeat passed, then two, then ten seconds.

By the end of that, most people were back in Stormbraver. It was a bizarre sight, seeing them all ushered out so fast, half panicked, half stumbling. Some were simply picked up and

somewhat roughly carried out in various stages of annoyance, inconvenience, and, for one person, sleep.

And eventually, they were all out. Except for Mercury, Breeze, Otto, and of course Lucia.

They'd spent a lot of effort building a powderkeg, after all. It would be a shame if they lacked the spark to ignite it.

Five more seconds passed, and Mercury *pulled*. The strings of reality pulled taut, the Dreamweave becoming narrower and more cramped. All of Envy was compressed into a smaller space, but eroded as it was, that was needed to fill it. The world grew whole again, even if smaller, the connections to the void and Stormbraver seared shut.

Then, Mercury took off the Stifled Silence.

All at once, noise flooded the space. The dull crackle of lightning built into a roaring thunder. It was a horrible, scraping noise, like a thousand miniature explosions, each distant and rumbling, shaking the sky. It was a cacophony of a storm ready to be unleashed. It was an abominable amount of energy, ready to tear a world apart.

"Lucia, fire!" Mercury said, a manic glint to his eyes.

With a gentle sigh, the woman drew back her bow, a blazing, gold-red arrow on the string. "Don't tell me what to do," she said haughtily, but loosed it all the same.

For a moment, hands tried to grasp the ruinous projectile. A thousand sprawling, branching limbs reaching up to try and stop it. In response, Otto grabbed the tree of limbs and thrashed it around like a child's doll, slamming it into the ground until it was broken and shattered, effortlessly lifting something bigger than most buildings.

And then, the arrow reached the storm. It bloomed.

A flower of fire sprawled out from the moment of impact. How it could *impact* the storm was a testament to the stored energy.

And it was glorious.

Fire bloomed throughout gusts of wind, and all that rage was unleashed at once. Lightning crackled and ignited, the gusts of wind it was carried on suddenly expanding outwards in a raging torrent. Wind and fire and lightning tore outwards, bringing a shockwave akin to a nuclear explosion.

It was a violent, horrid affair. Instantly, the moment it touched Mercury, his eardrums ruptured. His fur burnt, and the skin on his face melted. He laughed.

He laughed.

“Hahahahaha!” In the face of world shaking destruction, he kept his eyes wide open. He witnessed it all. He saw the way Envy perished, the way the raging storm broke through all of its cages. It was a hundred thousand lightning bolts, an annihilating tornado and a raging forest fire all coiled into one enormous thing. The shockwave wanted to blow him off his feet, but he stayed in place with his *riijn*, letting them be battered by the enormous force.

Arms and bones of Envy were ground into *dust*. Made into nothing but smears and stains against the ground, pushed against the boundary of this world and shattering rather than breaking through it. It was a horror show coalesced into a single breath. Mercury did breathe in, and instantly, his lungs bubbled and boiled and shocked. His heart spasmed, and he took hold of it with a ghostly hand from <Force of the Hecatoncheires>, pumping it himself.

It was so beautiful.

The sky awash with red and yellow and violent arcs of blue destruction. Each finger of the thousands of hands of Envy acting like a lightning rod, bolts and wind and furious flame slamming into them, pulverizing bones and turning blood to steam.

Mercury’s rain did the same. It became a steam, a thin cloudy fog that permeated the entire area. Scalding hot enough to burn, and yet calm enough to keep the explosion contained. Superheated steam wrapped around Otto and Lucia, keeping them as safe as they could be.

Oh, their skin was exposed to boiling temperatures. Sure, a few bolts of lightning slammed into them, but neither seemed to bothered.

Lucia’s hair whipped in the tearing winds. Her eyes reflected the pooling flames like the destructive maniac she was. Otto watched on with wonder as the colours unfurled, as if he was watching a sped up video of a painting being made. Colours poured across the realm, evaporating anything else.

Mercury’s flesh was scalded from his bones. Light washed over him so bright he became nothing more than an outline. He laughed, even when his vocal chords disintegrated. Even as his body dissolved.

[<Tempered Body> has levelled up! <Tempered Body lv. 5 -> 6>]

He burned, and it was still beautiful. The pain was washed away, as simple signals that had long since lost their purpose in his body. There was no need for warnings, because despite everything, he lived.

The infinity engine in his heart pumped, and he poured that energy into <Hydration> and <Resolution>. Already, the scaling heat was receding, the world awash in white incandescence. Superheated fog laid on his raw muscles as his skin regrew, weaving from threads of thoughts.

[<Hydration> has levelled up! <Hydration lv. 7 -> 8>]

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

And on that ruined land, <Rain fell>.

Slowly, the mist cooled down. The storm stopped raging, because there was nothing left to rage against. Envy was reduced into a shell of itself, a hollow world of bright colours and nothing else. Nothing else except four people.

A monster, a mopaaw, an archer and a boy.

Of course, a few seconds later, a dragon joined them.

Green grass grew over the ruined floor of Envy as Mercury's other self joined them. Two parts of him worked as one again, all his minds focused on the same place and time. He manifested his dream, working hard to keep it expanded outwards as the spatial bubble of Envy caved inwards.

Threads rushed into his nexus and were absorbed. Not enough to get it to the next rank, but enough to expand his inner space some more. His dream was powerful. He smiled a little, then reached out to the <Tapestry>. Envy had fed off of connections like those, and so could he.

With <Dream Manifestation>, he held the void at bay. Then, with <Voidwalker>, he somehow found solid ground where there was nothing at all. <Itinerant> gave his step meaning, carrying him forward and letting him take a path that was little more than an emotional connection as his <Tapestry> pointed the way.

Mercury blinked, and he was back at the lake, distant from Stormbraver. Breeze was curled up in the grass, Otto ruffling the kid's hair. Lucia faced a quick embrace from Iris. Bael stood awkwardly, half-hidden behind a tree, as Marcel elbowed her in the ribs and Avery barked

out a laugh. Ruvah and Juno were curled up on the frozen-over lake, the water spirit having cast some magic.

Aurora and the once-skinwalkers blinked at the change in atmosphere, smiling faintly. There was a brick road leading out of the forest, probably laid by Yasashiku, and people were... just walking home.

Mercury laughed a little. And then, he calmed himself, noting Zyl's head still buried in his fur. He smiled, gently, and pressed his snout loving into his Boyfriend's hair, closing his eyes and enjoying the moment.

He felt... good. One more thing crossed off the list. Three sins down, perhaps four to go. And, of course, the rewards that would come with it.