

Chapter 270: Outset

Mercury, very reasonably, should not have had a sunburn.

His regeneration Skill had just evolved. He was made of wood and ice and air and energy now. All of those things inherited material properties that made them suitable for being something living - apparently that also meant they degraded under sunlight? In a way, everything did but still... this seemed oddly fast.

After all, Mercury was tough! Things took rather large bites out of him rather frequently, so it didn't always *feel* that way, but he was tough. He could break stone with his paws if he hit it hard enough. Hell, most metal would break if it hit him. An ordinary steel sword probably couldn't even cut him anymore.

Despite all of that, his skin was red and raw and aching. It shouldn't do that. He still had all the effects of <Adaptation> and <Hydration>! Every bit of damage he took both temporarily and *permanently* increased his resistance to that form of damage. If the sun was causing him trouble, he should just heal up and have it fixed.

"That looks nasty. Let's get you some ointment?" Zyl suggested, combing his fingers through his boyfriend's fur. Mercury just grumbled in reply.

He didn't want to get burnt ointment, but apparently, life didn't go as he wanted. With a gentle roll of his eyes, he stepped outside with Zyl - and instantly, the sun seemed very bright to him. Like, oddly bright. He looked over at the dragon and squinted. "Hey, Zyl... does the sun look... bigger, to you?" he asked.

The dragon gave the sky a quick glance, then gently shook his head. "Not to me, no," he said. "Does it to you?"

"Just a smidge," Mercury said, voice filled with suspicion. "Might be imagining it."

In response, Zyl only gave a noncommittal hum, opting to instead walk through the city with Mercury, opening up a small parasol to shield the mopaaw from the heat. His skin was still raw, after all, so it was best to avoid more direct exposure.

Soon, they'd stopped at an apothecary, gotten some ointment, and headed back home. Zyl rubbed it in, even though it smelled a little too strong, and Mercury complained about how sticky it made his fur feel. "It'll help," Zyl reassured him.

Of course, he was right. Mercury could feel that it was cooling his skin down. The sunburn was less uncomfortable. He also assimilated some ice into his skin right underneath it, cooling the area further, just to let his skin heal properly. He stayed inside all day.

And so, a little while passed. After a day or three, Mercury was hale and hearty again, the little sunburn nothing more than a memory. He still avoided the sun largely, but eventually, decided to lay down in his hammock again, enjoying a couple rays of sunlight.

He hopped into his favourite spot right underneath the window, letting the light gently reach his fur... and then he hissed. It felt so dang *hot*! His eyes turned to the sky again, and he instantly hopped out of his hammock, skin already feeling a little raw. His fur curled slightly from the heat.

"The sun's getting bigger, Zyl," Mercury announced, barging into his boyfriend's studio.

The dragon turned to meet the mopaaw, blinking slowly. He wore an apron splashed with colour, then gave a gentle sigh, dragging his hand through his hair, and walked with Mercury to the window he laid in. Hesitantly, Zyl held a hand into the light.

Nothing happened.

"It feels completely normal," the dragon said, flipping his hand over. He stuck his face down, taking a good look out the window, squinting as he stared right at the sun. "Size seems normal, too," he hummed.

Mercury frowned, a deeply unhappy expression wearing itself deep into his snout. "Fine, alright, let me show you, then," he said haughtily. Without hesitation, he stepped into the light.

A moment passed, then two, and then, there was a soft *sizzling*. Zyl sniffed the air, then his eyes widened, and he pulled Mercury out of the sunlight, waving away the remaining bits of smoke. His fur was curled again, the ends blackened ever-so-faintly. The two just spent a moment staring at each other.

"Are you-"

"I am not becoming a vampire, Zyl," Mercury said with a frown. "No, I did not let anyone else bite me. No, I did not contract any diseases. I think the sun just decided it hates me."

The dragon opened his mouth one more time, but Mercury interrupted him. "Yes, Zyl. I'm entirely, 100% positive I'm not turning into a vampire." Zyl shut his mouth, giving a sigh instead as he dragged his hand through his hair again.

"What then?" he asked, after a little while, the two having taken more steps away from the sunlight. "Why would the sun hate you?"

"Jealousy or something? I dunno," Mercury said with a shrug. "I'm not exactly a sun expert."

Zyl crossed his arms, and his brows knitted together as he frowned. "So what do we do? Can you just... assimilate the sunlight?"

For a moment, Mercury hummed at the idea. "Sure, let's try it." He quickly took a step forward, into the light, and stole a couple strands of light to weave into himself.

They promptly began searing long lines of black into his flesh. Any part of him they touched burnt, until they wore themselves out of power. Zyl hissed as he saw the effect, even though Mercury was mostly unbothered. <Babbling Brook> easily took care of the pain from a little bit of burnt flesh. Instead, he just sighed softly.

"Seems like I can't assimilate it away," Mercury noted drily. "What else do we got?"

For a long moment, Zyl said nothing, evidently stumped. He just kind of... stared at the window angrily. As if punching it might solve everything. Mercury really did appreciate the sentiment, but for now, he'd jot down "punching the sun" as... well, not exactly first spot on the list of things to try.

"I'll get another fire-specialist," Zyl said eventually. "You just wait here."

Mercury gave a soft snicker. "Don't worry," he said. "I won't step into the light."

Which made the dragon shoot him a glare before he ran off.

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Lucia gave him a smug grin. "Chuchuchu. What's wrong, Mercury? Can't handle a little sun? Maybe if you spent less time cooped up in-

Mercury held his paw into the light. It quickly started smoking.

The priestess' eyes widened. "Oh. Shit."

With an eyeroll, the mopaaw nodded. "Yeah. Shit. It sucks pretty hard. So, what do we do?"

"What do I know?" Lucia said haughtily, shrugging. "I am no sun-scholar. You'd be better served browsing the library... or, I suppose, heading eastward. The Skyflame Monks may be able to better help you."

Zyl blinked. "The Skyflame Monks?" he asked.

Lucia shot him an almost annoyed look, then nodding, her long hair bobbing up and down with the motion as she crossed her arms. "Yeah. The Skyflame Monks. It's a sect on the eastern part of Damoy. Lots of sects there. I'm... not completely aware of the political landscape, but I know its rough layout."

"And what would that be?" Mercury asked.

"Speaking plainly, there are righteous, demonic, and chaotic sects. These are at a constant war with each other for resources. Most of these conflicts try to spare 'mortals' the trouble - these cultivators themselves consider themselves on the path to immortality - but anyone walking around may be a cultivator in disguise. Conflicts escalate quickly, and often result in backup being called. Being respectful is seen as rather important," Lucia summarized.

Mercury gave a long, deep breath, then slowly, took on a gentle smile. "Do they have many monsters?" he asked.

"Oh, tons," Lucia said with a dismissive wave. "Spiritual beasts are abundant in the mountains."

"Any idea on their stance towards true kin like me?" Mercury asked.

At that, the priestess gave a long hum, tapping her chin in thought. "I can't say for certain," she said, dragging out the words, "but I'd imagine that a sort of human form might do better. Then you could simply claim to have awoken some kind of ancient bloodline or somesuch," she suggested.

Finally, Mercury nodded. He smiled a little, and then took a deep breath. Turning to Zyl he gently tilted his head. "So?" he asked.

"So?" Zyl asked right back, tilting his head in a mirror of the cat's motion.

In response, Mercury tilted his head the other way. "We doing a roadtrip or what?" he asked, a thin smirk playing on his lips.

"You wanna travel?" the dragon asked, raising an eyebrow. "When you get hurt by the sun?"

"So we travel at night," Mercury shrugged.

Zyl snickered, then nodded, quickly running his hand through Mercury's fur. "Of course I'm up for a road trip. I always am," he said happily. Indeed, he seemed rather pleased at the thought of travelling. Then, his brows furrowed again. "How are you gonna solve the whole human form thing, though. I thought you turned down the Skill for it?"

At that, Mercury grinned. "I did," he said. He had, after all, turned down <Self-Made Man>. But that didn't mean he was out of options.

There were a couple things in his toolkit he could use for rather severe body modification. He was probably not even going to need all of it! He could write it into the fabric of his existence, of course, but that didn't seem quite... appropriate. Instead, he just picked a few different things.

<Grain of Infinity> supercharged <Shift>. It was a spell meant for making large-scale alterations to his body - he could, of course, use that to heal himself. But he could also use it to... squish himself down and reshape some parts. It worked on parts he had assimilated just as well as on his main self, and with the absolute torrent of energy powering it, the spell swiftly came into effect.

[<Shift> has levelled up! <Shift lv. 2 -> 4>]

Mercury's body shifted and twisted painlessly. Body parts changed shape. And, at the same time, he pulled another little trick. He <Assimilated> his entire body.

Flesh, brain, bone, nerves, tendons... everything. Every organ, every piece of flesh and blood, all assimilated to reshape into body parts as he wanted.

In a few moments, he turned from a cat to a sentient mix of flesh, wood, ice, light, energy and air. Then, those parts trembled under his Skills and Spell. He was meant to be adaptable. He could dream himself into being, <Resolve> as whatever shape he wanted. Another Skill activated, and the goal shifted.

Flesh reshaped itself under the effect of more abilities, and slowly, Mercury took a humanoid shape. He grew two legs - though they were still digitigrade. He grew a long, slender torso,

and a head. Parts of him were carved from ice and wood, but they were so lifelike it hardly mattered.

The Dream of Starvation wove around his legs, giving the appearance of pants, and even an elegant pair of sleek, black shoes. The Storm's Raiment wove into existence as a long-sleeved suit jacket and undershirt, both in pure white, almost matching Zyl. Mercury's hands were carved from ice and sported long claws. His face was handsome, his features sharp.

His face looked middle aged. He wore a well-cut beard of silver, reaching around his mouth and upper lip, but not further up his cheeks - it was, in fact, ice, but refracted the light to look silver enough. The rest of his face was covered in faint fur, too. His eyes were the same as always, silver, with clouds of purple passing deep in them. His hair was made from his fur, a messy tide of it pooling down to his shoulders.

When he'd lived on earth, he'd cut it short, but by now he was used to it. The tips of it were a faint lilac, the same as the patterns on his fur had been. A pair of cat ears poked out from his mane, small reminders that he was not quite human. Lines of many smiles were worn into his face, crow's feet just beginning to form, his features equally sharp and gentle. He was handsome, but not outrageously so.

And then, for the final touch - <Veil> and an inverted <Truth>, turning it into a <Lie>.

They hid the facsimile of his shape. Fur began to look like human hair. His icy beard was just like normal. His face, carved from wood, and covered in faint fur, seemed like human skin. His hands, ice cold, gained an impression of warmth. Claws disappeared. His legs bent the normal way. His tail, lazily waving in the air behind him, was still there, though with <Veil> covering it, and the Storm's Raiment hanging around his shoulder and below his back, it would be hard to notice.

And then, Mercury smiled.

Somehow, this version of him was *alive*. If he regenerated long enough, he could even make this into a fully flesh-based facsimile of a human. <Assimilation>, combined with <Shift> was enough to let him shapeshift, after all.

As his face moved, the lines of smiles wore themselves just a little deeper into his face. "What do you think?" he asked.

Zyl and Lucia stood there with their jaws hanging open.

"I'm more buff than I ever used to be, yes, but to be fair... I literally have a <Tempered Body>! I deserve the muscles, surely," he admitted sheepishly, scratching the back of his head in a very human way. Some of the habits were returning to him even as he spoke.

There was a real heart thumping in his chest, and real lungs letting him draw breath. He had an extra pair of ribs, amusingly, and his spine needed some working; it wasn't *quite* human. There were a few oddities about his body, some strange movements, but <Veil> made it all seem natural.

Amusingly, since cat legs were too different from human arms, he had entirely formed the arms from assimilated ice and wood, opting to keep the flesh that made up his front legs in <Assimilation>'s storage feature until he became a cat again.

Zyl, very slowly, licked his dry lips. His eyes shook slightly. "You're... how...?" he gasped slowly.

"Hm?" Mercury's eyes turned a little sad, almost worried. He took a shuffling step forward, stumbling gently, then stopped. He didn't reach out, didn't touch Zyl. He just balled his fist. "I'm sorry," he said, the smile vanishing. He turned to the side, staring at the floor. "I thought this would be fun, and that-"

A moment later, the dragon grabbed him by the shoulders, intently staring into his eyes. "You're so handsome!" Zyl said. Mercury blinked. Zyl smiled, almost tearing up a little. "You look great, Mercury. Is this what...?"

"Don't ask that," the mopaaw chided, ever so gently, his eyes softening again. He pressed a kiss against Zyl's lips for a short moment, pulling the dragon into a hug. "I'm glad you aren't repulsed."

"Never," the dragon said gently. "In fact," a small smile wove itself on his face, too, and he leaned forward, to whisper into Mercury's human ears - he had two pairs of them now, yes. "If you show me your dragon form, I'll turn into a mopaaw," he said quietly.

Mercury blushed a little at the proposal, then laughed. "Hahaha! Alright. Sounds good." He stared into the dragon's eyes for a while longer, letting the moment linger. Then, he remembered Lucia was in the room, and turned to look at the priestess.

She blinked at him, and he blinked back, and then, Lucia blinked a dozen more times. Mercury hastily extracted himself from Zyl's embrace, stumbling back - his new legs still taking some getting used to. He'd have them down soon though. He was a quick learner.

"No, no, you're fine," Lucia said, turning slightly red, quickly bringing up her hands and turning around. "I was just surprised," she said with a few coughs. "Shapeshifting magic isn't particularly common. I hadn't thought you were capable of it."

"That was my first attempt," Mercury readily admitted, with an awkward chuckle.

Instantly, Lucia whipped around again, grabbing him by the shoulders - or trying to. Mercury just took a step backwards. Lucia blinked as she grabbed air, then pulled back awkwardly, taking a more dignified position. "Well," she spoke slowly. "For a first attempt it was quite skilled. I also appreciate you summoning clothes before... Well."

"Yeah," Mercury said. "No worries. That'd be very weird of me."

"Quite," she said. Then, slowly, she seemed to get her wits about her again. Bit by bit, she smiled at Mercury. "You're still smaller than me," she noted.

At that, the mopaaw laughed. "Hah! Yes. I sure am. You're tall! And I've never been a giant."

"You're not small either," Zyl noted.

"Five-eight-ish," Mercury said.

"I have no idea what that means," Lucia shook her head. "Those are random numbers."

Mercury laughed, rubbing the back of his head again. "Sorry. Measurements where I'm from."

Nodding with Grace, Lucia simply accepted the answer. Then, she walked past Mercury, gazing out the window. "Iris will take this news terribly," she said with a sigh. "She was hoping you'd be cuter. Perhaps suitable for dresses."

"Hahahaha! No, I'm more comfortable in pants," he noted drily.

"We will not press the issue," Lucia said with a small sigh.

Mercury raised an eyebrow. "We?" he asked.

"Iris," the priestess correctly sharply, clenching her hands into fists behind her back. "Iris will not press the issue."

Snickering in reply, the mopaaw just nodded. "Sure, sure," he said. "Now, Zyl. Anything else we need covered before heading out?" he asked, tilting his head gently. The gesture looked

casually curious in his human form. Combined with his eyes, it felt a little like he was going to pick apart whatever he was looking at.

Zyl shivered for a moment, then gave a smile and a shake of his head. “Not particularly,” he said. “Just a couple changes of clothes.”

“I am wearing living metal and a storm, Zyl,” Mercury noted.

“Correction,” the dragon noted, “I will need a couple changes of clothes.”

At that, the mopaaw snickered. “Go pack your luggage,” he said. “I’m ready to go whenever you are.”

Lucia blinked at the two of them in confusion, then gave a gentle sigh. “So you’ll be travelling again, then?”

“Sure will.”

She crossed her arms, raising a single eyebrow. Mercury felt heat spill off her as her annoyance began to rapidly climb. “And you’ll expect me to let everyone know, huh?”

Looking at her expression, Zyl quickly darted off to grab his clothing, but Mercury was prepared for this situation. He gave her his brightest, kindest, most gently-awkward smile.

“Well, you are one of our most trusted friends. Hearing it from someone as kind as you might also make the news easier to take for some, y’know.”

At that, she stared at him, then haughtily looked away. “Hmph! Fine, then. I’ll play page for you,” she admitted grumpily.

Mercury gave a bright smile, and nodded. “Alright. I’ll make you some tea while we wait for Zyl to be ready, alright? He might need a lil bit.”

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Three cups later, the dragon finally clambered back down the stairs, carrying an overstuffed, bulging red suitcase. Mercury snickered at the sight, and Lucia rolled her eyes. “What all did you take,” she asked.

Zyl ran a hand through his hair, smiling awkwardly as he came up to the table. “Well,” he started. “Sunscreen, travel weights set, some make up and remover, my gloves, three self-cleaning suits, painting supplies, a bit of gardening gear...”

“Gardening gear?” Mercury asked.

“Ah. I was planning to sell myself as a travelling herbalist,” Zyl said with a soft snicker. “Suits me, doesn’t it?”

Mercury thought about it for a moment, then nodded. “Huh,” he said. “It’s quite clever, really. Yes. I’ll bill myself as a blacksmith, then,” he said happily. “Or woodworker, too, I suppose.”

Lucia shook her head at their antics, taking another calm sip from the iced tea. “You two will be hidden old masters, then,” she said with a sly smile.

“Masters? Surely not,” Zyl said, looking at his suitcase. Mercury quickly tapped it, depositing it in his inventory. With a raised eyebrow he asked an unspoken question, and Zyl nodded awkwardly.

The dragon’s inventory must already be filled with more suitcases.

“Be off then,” Lucia said, closing her eyes as she sipped the tea, lazily waving her hand. “It’s dusk. You should get an early start before Mercury starts burning at the break of dawn.”

“Right, thanks Lucia!” Zyl said, quickly pulling open the door. Mercury walked after him slowly, throwing the priestess another thankful glance and a wave, which she returned. When the door swung closed again, she gently set down the teacup and wistfully looked out the window.

“Finally,” she said, a small smile playing on her lips. “Some peace and quiet.”

For Mercury was off to make a different region of the world unsafe.

Despite all that, though... he smiled as he took the first few steps out of the gate and onto the road, taking a deep breath. There was something about travelling, something that the city just didn’t have.

Mercury Rainfall Starlight was on the road again. Beware all travellers who met him, may their fates be forever changed.