

Chapter 246: Holding up the Sky, just for a Moment

Proving that he meant well was rather easy when he did and had a Skill to show people his sincerity. In the passing weeks, he once again took to just... solving people's problems. He fixed roofs and broken doors, he listened to people's problems and took away the pain of injured people, helping the healers.

He was good at that. He helped clean the water with some elemental manipulation, helped keep homes with non-functioning heating warm, and was especially good at resolving trouble with nightmares and insomnia.

A few weeks passed, and Mercury found himself more popular than ever. Life was silly that way. But hey, if becoming a bit of a celebrity meant his eccentrics were more likely to be tolerated, then that was fine. He didn't mind helping people, after all. The usage of his Skills and abilities made for very good practice.

There were multiple times he felt himself brush up against the third veil again. It felt softer than the previous ones, but somehow spongy and stretchy. He couldn't just bash his head into it and shatter it, but he'd find the way eventually, he was sure.

For now, all he did was practice and meditate and work. Trying his best to be happy, and all that. And for the most part, it worked.

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Another year passed.

The wedding was wonderful. Mercury was Iris' best man, and Yvette a bridesmaid. Zyl carried their rings. There was cake and laughter and happiness.

The fireworks were almost as beautiful as the smiles.

After that, pages drifted by.

Mercury learned more about runes, and about smithing. He twisted his rijn into tongs, into hammers, into gloves, into chisels and stakes. He'd improved by miles. <Magical Metallurgy> went all the way to level 6. <Medicine> reached level 9. <Force of the Hecatoncheires> went up to 3.

The most substantial change he'd gone through was one night, when he gazed at the stars, enjoyed the silence, and smelled the faint bits of festival food in the air. It had triggered a massive Skill fusion.

<Enhanced Hearing>, <Enhanced Smell>, and <Night Vision> had fused into <Greater Perception>.

A much more versatile Skill that seemed to also feed into his supernatural senses, which was nice.

[<Greater Perception>: A Skill that enhances every sensory ability by the individual and enables some synergistic crossover. The world becomes clearer to you. If you can detect something with one sense, it will be easier to detect it with another. Yes, food will taste better if you can see it.]

The description was rather plain, but Mercury didn't mind at all. It was a nice Skill to have.

He spent quite a bit of time with Juno, teaching her a bit of magic, playing hide-and-seek like games to train stealth. She took rather well to shadow related abilities, though whenever she did transform into one, it took on a silvery sheen. Almost like moonlight, spilled out across the floor.

It was enough to level up his <Beast King> to level 2, after all this time. He looked at the ability with a wistful smile. It was, after all, one of his oldest companions.

Many things happened in a year, but at the end of the day, it was still *quiet*. People visited. They talked, they drank, they sparred, they found hobbies and dropped them again. Zyl got good at painting, and a few flowers he particularly liked were preserved in the silvery amber from the Stifled Silence, hanging in their house.

Avery liked board games, and Mercury made more than a few of those, recreating some from earth with wood and metal. This made him practice turning his *rijn* into a whole host of new tools. Rasps, especially, were tricky, since they needed to be coarse, and maintaining such a specific, small structure, was difficult.

But it was also good practice. He used <Sever> for planing and cutting and flattening. The Skill made near perfectly smooth slices of wood. And with <Water>, he could coax any felled trees into drying out much faster.

All of that was to say that Mercury had gotten rather good at a few different crafts. He was now much better at working with metal, wood, runes, and even weaving. His own <Thread> Skill had picked up 2 levels, putting it at level 9 and probably just short of an evolution.

A lot of his Skills were like that. Sitting just in front of an evolution, but not quite having crossed the threshold where he could evolve them just yet. That was okay, too.

It was after more than a full year, when the days were just starting to cool again, that things eventually happened.

Well, that was a bit of a cruel assessment of the situation. Things had been happening for the whole year, it was just that bad things coming for him specifically waited until that moment.

Mercury was looking up at the night sky from the roof of their house. He'd added a bit of an extension to the ceiling, a small platform for him to relax in. It was made from wood and thread, forming a flexible web of fabric. Like a silvery, thick spiderweb. Or catweb, really.

As he stood on that place, he felt the world grow thin.

That, by itself, was not that special. The world grew thin every so often, he'd noticed. There were simply times when reality was less real, and felt less real. He'd become attuned to those moments, that felt like he was in two places at once, like his own voice echoing in his head, like every second had passed already.

It was a little bit like a mix between a deja-vu and an experience of the world as unreal.

Except, this time, that moment didn't simply pass peacefully. Instead, the thinning grew stronger, until the world was dissonant and rung in Mercury's ears. He sighed, quietly, and opened his eyes.

Ihn'ar enveloped him like an old friend's embrace, and the layers of falsehood were peeled back like an onion. Mercury saw the sky, glittering with stars, as an imposed tapestry, woven from pretty fabric, spray painted by someone really rather talented at graffiti. There was the tip of a knife poking against it, tearing through those ethereal, dream-like threads.

A sword of Damocles, hanging over Mercury's head like a guillotine.

It had only been a matter of time, really. When he was in the fae realm, wrath had found him. He'd killed gluttony, a wandering arch, and now wrath had latched onto him.

Mercury made his rijn into a needle, and stitched the fabric of the world closed against the knife. He stirred, and walked to Zyl, bearing the strain of keeping the sky up with three of his zeyjn, leaving the fourth free for conversation.

“Hey, Zyl,” he said.

The dragon turned to face him, drops of paint splattered across his handsome cheeks, a brush still held in his gloved hands. He was painting. Had been painting, at least. “Yes, dear?”

Holding his gaze, Mercury sighed softly. “It’s time,” he said.

“Ah,” Zyl nodded. “You have our connection ready?”

“Yes,” Mercury said.

“Juno in your shadow?” he asked.

Mercury smiled at his boyfriend’s worries. “Yes,” he said. “I’m all ready to go. Give everyone the letters I’ve prepared. I’ll see about visiting Kintra on my way back.”

Zyl nodded, then smiled, running a hand through the mopaaw’s silvery fur. “Alright. Enjoy your travels. I’ll be just around the corner if you need me.”

“Of course, Zyl. I love you,” Mercury said.

“I love you too,” the dragon replied, pressing a kiss onto his lover’s forehead.

And then, he had to watch him go.

Zyl knew it would not be easy. He’d known it from the very start. That Mercury wanted to see more of the world. And that he did not yet have a place there.

He’d known that the mopaaw would find a day, a quiet, beautiful one like today, and then walk. That he’d simply wait, hoping he’d be back. Knowing he’d be back, really, since the mopaaw seemed to make the impossible possible.

And yet, he could not help but worry. It was in his nature as a partner, that he wanted the one he loved to be safe. They'd started off on an impulse, but by now, he truly did adore his boyfriend, wholeheartedly. Mercury had saved him, and he'd saved the mopaaw in turn. It was as simple as that:

If Mercury asked, Zyl would put his life on the line.

Yet, he didn't ask.

Mercury simply walked off, on his own four legs, and Zyl saw him strain to hold up the sky. He saw his back get smaller as he walked down the streets, eventually hopped over the city walls, and disappeared beyond them.

Zyl had known that his boyfriend was meant to be an adventurer... but that did not make it any easier to see him go.

The dragon gently placed down the brush, placed his face in his hands, and let out the sigh he'd been holding in.

He'd not asked to come along, because he knew Mercury would agree, and he'd dislike it. Zyl loved being part of those adventures when it was his time to be. But, for now, he respected his partner's wishes.

Even when it hurt to see him walk away.

The day was bittersweet.

Zyl hid that it killed him not to come, but Mercury bore with it. His boyfriend was doing him a favour, and he would not make it any harder on the big guy. Instead, he simply walked.

It was kind of funny how that worked. There was something amazingly freeing about picking a direction and just... walking. Mercury knew he'd be fine. He could eat almost anything, didn't need air to breathe, and could make his own water. There was nothing to be scared of, so he simply leaned into the freedom of it all.

He was <Itinerant>, and as he moved, the world writhed to let him. Distances shortened, and he was over the walls in a few short steps, beyond them in a single hop. Breeze sat outside on the grass, looking at the sky.

"A storm, Biso," the kid said. "A storm of fire and fury."

Mercury smiled at the ghost of a dead boy, and nodded. "So it seems."

"You're walking towards it," Breeze noted. "Shouldn't you run?"

"When we played tag, didn't I chase you, too?" Mercury asked.

At that, Breeze paused, then smiled brightly. "Yes! Okay." He raised his hand to point into the horizon. "Catch that sword, Biso!"

Gracefully, Mercury nodded. "Of course."

Another step, and his <Truth> boosted <Itinerant>, turning the spell into effective teleportation. After three steps he'd made it to the edge of the forest around Stormbraver. One more and the lights of the city disappeared.

Silence.

What dominated the empty forests at night was silence.

Oh, sure, there were insects and critters, but they were still quiet. The sound of life, holding its breath. Suppressed by the falling sky.

Mercury looked up, and took a breath. He let go. A million red stars bloomed above him, tiny knife points pricking through the fabric of reality, and the world opened up like a yawning void. Wrath fell like a lightning bolt.

Electricity coursed through his veins, and he felt his muscles cramp. Furious monsters of steel fell onto him, dragging metallic teeth across his skin - and failing to pierce it.

He took a deep breath, summoning air into his lungs. Claws raked against his <Tempered Body> and failed to leave anything more than scratches. Tiny little reaves that barely hurt. Then, with a twist of his mind, he summoned <Grief> and <Metal>.

A tide of silver spilled from Mercury, and devoured the metallic monsters. They sank into the liquid, and their bodies dissolved. They unravelled, joining the flood of quicksilver before they could resist.

Mercury looked at the sky, an open, bleeding wound in the world, torn by an angry sun, and he pulled it open. A curtain of reality, parting against his touch, and unravelling to let him step forward.

Fury washed over him with the cold embrace of certainty, the knowledge that violence would come, and Mercury sighed. He summoned the Stifled Silence, a silver crown weaving around his head. The Dream of Starvation cloaked all his paws in a blanket of dark metal. The world settled around him, with starlight amber filling the gaps.

Mercury made his mind a needle and wielded it with the deft certainty of practice - and the rift sealed behind him. Then, finally, he looked forward.

Gluttony had been desolate. Plains of ash with no end. Where gluttony had starved, wrath was feeding.

Roiling violence was all this realm knew. It was cast from metal, full of razor sharp edges. Each blade of grass was an actual blade, sharp enough to impale one's feet on. Each tree was decked in a thousand needles, bladed leaves gliding on the wind and scraping against metallic skin.

Creatures roiled. The floor was covered, no footfall free from monsters. Steel abominations, with no mind but violence. They were woven extensions of the core of this realm, single minded in their desire to show the world their ferocity. Mercury appeared in their midst, and a hundred thousand eyes snapped to him.

He saw the dark sky, full of red stars. Saw the furious sun hang in its middle. Saw the vast castle of dreaded iron in the distance. He breathed in and the sterile air smelled of blood. Mercury smiled.

This was where he needed to be.

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[Main Quest: "Wrath"

Condition: The individual has made their way into the steel garden, the home of fury. An angry sun seeks to wipe you from its world. Repair the tapestry.

Reward: <Veil> mastery increase, <Sever> mastery increase, <Prevailing> and <Perseverance> fusion.]

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The realm *shrieked* at him.

It was a horrible noise of rending metal, tearing into his eardrums, telling him to disappear, to die in a ditch, that he was a worthless piece of trash that deserved only spite and anger. It sent the clear message of hatred.

And it couldn't throw him out.

<Guest> and <Star Usurper> were already hard at work, forcing this angry plane to accept him. When he was cloaked in his <Veil> and a thin haze of <Rainfall>, there was simply nothing wrath could do to just throw him out - except try to kill him.

A tide of metal bodies fell on him and did just that.

But, just before the first one even got to him, Mercury smiled. He was happy. Even when it hurt to leave home, it still felt right. This place was horrible. It was all sterile, angry metal. Sharp edges and a lust for blood. And Mercury loved it.

He really, truly loved it. Because it was new. A part of the world he had not seen before - a part of the world separate to where he usually was. Cutting open the fabric of reality and taking things, he supposed. And it was so pretty, in its own, horrible, jagged way.

[Level Up!]

Mercury smiled, seeing that number tick up to forty. He felt the change, instantly. A coil of power building in his chest, burning around his heart, like a compressed spring ready to snap. As soon as he asked, he would change. But, before then... There was metal to be smithed.

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Baelzebuth, ruler of the demon realm, stirred in their chair. Lazily, they blinked open the four eyes on their head, raising one of their four scaled arms, and bringing an oversized piece of meat to the maw on his stomach.

He stretched, popping the set bones in his spine, then consumed some more with the maws on his palms. Only one was brought to his face for a yawn.

“Aaaaah,” the man who was once the thing said. “If I keep going at this rate, I may as well pay a visit to sloth.”

He snickered at his own joke, fanged mouth lazily twisting into a smile, tongue hanging from it. They felt the whispers of the world shaking. The way another fragment of horror had scraped against it, wanting to take and devour.

One of his siblings, certainly. This one seemed rather angry, so it was probably wrath. It was a sight, seeing red stars blossoming up. When had the last full descent been? It must have been a while... But seeing those stakes of steel pierce the earth was a sight. Baelzebuth couldn't even eat them.

Slowly, he rose from his chair, stretching his senses outward to see just how it had gone.

Then, he found himself surprised. The location wasn't right.

Usually, his siblings only fell upon the world when in certain places. Oh, they moved, sure, but the patterns were predictable. Neat, even. Calm little adjustments for their twisted, alien minds. Wrath fell in the far west, feasting on the bloody war between devils and demons.

And yet, now, he felt it in the east. From the central continent. How curious.

Bael's stomach rumbled with the same hunger it always did. He frowned, running razor sharp claws over scaled skin and crossing his second set of imposing arms. He hummed a bit, then ate some more, until the food in his chamber ran out.

Then he sighed. If his sibling had found a new host, there'd be a bloodbath. He'd tolerated the vestiges of gluttony on the central continent, since it wasn't as infectious, but wrath descended more often and more angrily. So, he looked closer, just to make sure it hadn't spread like the furious sickness it was.

And he found, through the borrowing of a scrying skill of some horror of the depths he'd consumed a hundred years ago, that the descent had been bloodless.

“That's new,” he said, rubbing his chin and leaning forward. His maw twisted into a wide grin. “My, my. Not even any damage? How out of character.” Did wrath decide to be a pacifist for once?

Hah! Unlikely.

Instead, it was much more likely that *something* bizarre had happened. Ah, and he was *ever* so hungry for news. For anything of interest.

With a rumbling sigh, the supreme ruler of all demons, the escaped avatar of gluttony, the monster of evolution, the *Thing*, rose from its perch and walked. Rumbling steps down a hall.

Ah, and hadn't some of its subordinates been in the area recently? Who was it again...

Zagan, right? He grinned. "Let's see what all the fuss is about, then."