

Chapter 263: Reshaped Dream

Turns out, putting magic into metals was hard.

The simple reason was that controlling anything on a molecular level was usually a delicate thing, and often reserved for sterile processes. There was nothing sterile about working with a forge. Sure, it was clean, but then you'd hit glowing hot metal, and slag and chips would come off it. Simply the way it was.

Weaving in magical lattices, especially ones that would mimic filters, attunements, or full-on spell structures was a nightmare. It was a horrible exercise that left Mercury feeling like it was futile for a good, long while. Whenever he held the structure with his mana, it would shatter with the first strike of his mind-hammer.

Sometimes, his angle was off, or there was a flaw in his structure, or the mana wasn't distributed properly, or he didn't align it correctly with the grain of the metal... A million and one reasons for failure, but only one way to do it right. So, he bashed his head against the metaphorical wall all day - and found failure after failure.

At the end of it all, Yasashiku chased him off, telling the mopaaw that he, unlike some *other people*, actually needed to sleep. With some grumbling, Mercury did indeed head home, and also resisted the urge to continue working within Little Pandora, the smithy inside his log. Instead, he laid down in his hammock, and looked at the stars in his sky.

Sighing softly, he decided, almost on a whim, to practice a little bit of normalcy, and close his eyes for once.

That, somehow, ended up being a strange feeling. He hadn't slept in... a good while. He'd rested his eyes sometimes, sure, but never like this, with faint moonlight shining in from the window. It had been a while since he properly let his thoughts drift, he supposed.

A moment passed as Mercury simply breathed, then another. Time drifted by like grains of sand falling down an hourglass. For his part, the mopaaw soon lost track of it all, letting his mind drift off and falling asleep.

Except, of course, that he awakened within his dream.

Mercury's eyelids slowly fluttered open on a bed of green grass, underneath a silver sun and patchwork sky. His dream was larger now, and more cared for. He looked out over the gardens and grass, into the distance where the remnants of wrath and envy laid. And he was... surprised at their beauty.

"You like it, boss?" came the question from Kim, the Gardener, close to him. "We been working hard on it all. Now, gardening with metal 'n bones was a little out of our wheelhouse, but we sure made it work, ey?"

The caterpillar-wolf-cat-rabbit *thing* looked rather pleased with themselves. And Mercury, looking into the distance, could see why.

First off, the progress on his own dream, and what he had dreamt up himself was incredible. There were gravel paths through fields of flowers, alleys of trees that case shade on the eternally waving grass. Little ponds that shone with mercurial light, and mercury saw small channels, lined with near-white tiles of stone, guiding the water from the distant fountain to those ponds, and through the fields.

There were lanterns, capturing the light that flickered from the distant citadel of fire, little motes of hungry plasma drifting around in them like butterflies. They case soft, drifting shades on the darker parts of the landscape, where dancing shadows lingered, and they decorated the trunk of Arber's avatar.

And in that, there was a great change. The thing that had once been a simple sapling had grown. It was now a towering tree, pale bark and branches stretching to the skies, covered with faint, light-green leaves. More lanterns hung from its twigs, attached by rope made from twine, and chains wreathed from Wrath's living metal.

"It's beautiful," Mercury said breathlessly, praising his gardener.

"Awww, shucks boss. Couldn't'a done it without 'cha. Plus, I love the gardens. Now I got plants to tend to, fields to make, and things to grow. It's lovely," they said, and the caterpillar gave the whole place a look-over with its monocle, radiating a pleasant sense of accomplishment. "Plus, while the new materials you've brought in aren't exactly conventional," they said with a hint of amusement, "they're still rather useful. The sand, for example - I plan to wash it and then maybe melt it into some crystals. And the metal is lovely, even if it's a lil sharp sometimes."

Those were the strangest things about it all. Mercury's dream had increased in rank, so, of course, it was larger. With every world he devoured, his own grew bigger. Its materials were

absorbed, though cleansed of *most* of their former intent. And, over time, it would mix with his own world.

Already, he could see grasses beginning to sprout over the adamantine hills of what was once Wrath, but Kim had taken care of those, too. Somehow, they'd wrought the metal. Mercury took a step, across the tapestry, since all of this was connected to him. A moment later, he stood in front of the devoured realm.

Metal, once sharp spires and twisted trees, had been all but tamed.

Iron and steel had been woven into a landscape. Cobblestone streets made of ringing metal, towering lanterns like those from earth, houses and street stalls. It was woven into a facsimile of a city. Empty, devoid of life, and yet... beautiful.

"It ain't done yet," Kim warned. "Still got a lot of refining to do. You'll see that some of the finer areas aren't quite done."

Mercury saw that, too. In the alleyways, there were no shifty figures, no half-open doorways for whispered words - it was spikes. Swords emerged from the edges of the buildings, and needles covered the floors, their sides razor sharp. The illusion of a city cracked at the edges, but when Mercury got close, the metal rippled, and receded.

Swords crumbled to droplets of steel that splashed harmlessly and melted into the ground. It calmed, instantly placated and assimilated into the nature of his dream, which, ultimately, was a hospitable place. Shaped and maintained by his intent and the nexus, the weave enforced his dream, and Mercury dreamt of pleasant meadows and beautiful scenery, apparently.

Actually executing that on Envy was harder than on wrath. After all, fundamentally, Envy had been made from hands and bodies and lifeblood. Cleaning Wrath of anger still left material behind, sand and metal. But for Envy, what was left?

Bones.

Ossified limbs, towering structures of enamel and ivory. A lake that had been filled with corpses under the boughs of a willow full of hands.

"This one's a rough piece of work," Kim said, making a motion that somehow conveyed scratching the back of their head, despite being a caterpillar. "Turning corpses into a pleasant place wasn't really... as doable as I thought, so I did my best workaround."

What Kim had made of Envy was a graveyard.

Hands made of bone had been sculpted and shifted into coffins, forever holding their inhabitants in an eternal embrace. The bodies in the lake had been sufficiently laid to rest. The tombstones and gravemarkers were carved from ice, semi-clear and nameless, lending the place a certain chill. Water dripped from them as if the graves themselves were weeping.

It was still creepy, and unsettling, but... it was also a calm place. Somber. With a faint, quiet fog over it all.

Mercury sighed softly, looking at it. "I suppose that's what happens," he said sadly, "when you clean up after something that kills."

"Bodies gotta go somewhere," Kim shrugged, a kind of wriggle going through their form. "I thought this was reasonably respectful."

The gravestones were mostly simple. Just plain rectangles, some having a bit of decoration. While the ice melted occasionally, the bits that dripped to the floor turned to faint bits of snow again, and none of the markers ever seemed to diminish. It was a dream, after all, so that much was no trouble.

Another long moment passed as Mercury took a deep breath, then finally nodded. "This is good. It'll be a while before it's properly integrated with the rest of it. Plant flowers or grass over the graves if you like," he said calmly.

'Is it common to have plants grow over graves where you are from, Yr'enzel?' a thought reached his mind. It tasted of hope, of power, of timelessness.

"It is," Mercury replied. "Not always, not everywhere. But... I find the image of life growing from the dead quite nice. There is a common image of the cycle of life. Dead things being metabolised by living things." A smile crept on his lips as he spoke, but he didn't turn to look.

'Hmmm,' came the answer. A long, patient hum. The thought radiated interest and curiosity, laden with a desire for understanding. 'That is nice. It is similar to how old weavers would make themselves into stars.'

A deep mourning resounded in Mercury's mind, ringing through his astral bones. The thing that was him trembled under the weight of that loss. It was so heavy it may have shattered someone. But Mercury didn't break.

Instead, he just sighed softly. "Death will always be around, as long as life is. There is beauty in that. In remembering those who've gone, in meeting new people. Connections are ephemeral. People will vanish from one's life eventually, some way, somehow. So there is purpose in enjoying the time you have, and closure in saying goodbye."

Old Uunrahzil gave him a sideways glance. 'You think of loss as a companion, rather than a scar,' they thought, and with it wrote curiosity and a hint of surprise.

For his part, Mercury simply nodded. "Kind of," he said. "It is cruel, and I will mourn any I miss. But I accept that it is something that happens, sometimes. Clinging onto blame or guilt is cruel to myself, and I try to be kind, even to me."

'*Even to thineself?*' came the rumble in return. 'Aren't you easily deserving of kindness?' they asked.

Mercury smiled faintly. "Yes, I am. But that doesn't mean it comes easy. Do you think it's easy to be kind to yourself?"

'... No,' Uunrahzil murmured. It was a quiet reply, laden with grief.

"Everyone knows their own flaws," Mercury sighed, stepping backwards from the fog, back out into the grassy plains with a single step. "Everyone knows their weaknesses. Every sin we've committed, every wrong we've wrought. When someone else harms someone, it is easy to forgive, because of the distance. When I harm someone, I remember. I care. That makes it harder to accept, harder to grow past."

Next to him the air quivered, and the massive construct of mana veins that constituted old Uunrahzil wove itself from threads of light. 'Distance brings comfort,' they thought, slowly, and Mercury read acceptance and understanding in their mind. 'And closeness brings risks.'

Smiling faintly, Mercury let his tail brush by some of the grass, making it wave in the slight breeze. "Indeed," he said. "And yet, it is so important." He looked at the silver sun in the sky, the bound items rotating around it, and the nexus beside it. A star that held the entire realm together, a spool of thread with it beside. It hummed faintly, a soft, calming noise like the rushing of a river.

'How important?' Uunrahzil asked.

"It's... everything," Mercury said with a snicker. "I think so, at least. Being alone is nice, even for long times, but eventually, people need people. Even you, and even me."

There was no reply for a long while after that. Old Uunrahzil, ancient and wise, shifted into a more comfortable position. The strange assortment of stone formations that their astral body was crafted from moved and contorted until they were doing... something akin to laying down. With their head out in front of them, and their eyes closed.

Despite everything, they looked... better. Comfortable, even. With a glance over at Mercury, they gave a mental huff. 'I'm glad I met you, Yr'enzel. I am more whole than ever.'

It was true. Mercury could see it now. When he broke through the veils, or even just using <Tapestry>, there were a thousand strings that connected old Dreamweaver to other parts of themselves. More than that, really. They drifted aimlessly through the space that wasn't, shattered pieces of a self that were not quite compatible anymore.

A puzzle whose edges had been worn down by time until they didn't fit. A broken thing, lost to the ocean.

Despite all that, they were closer than before. And Mercury could feel it, too. Dreamweaver was... **more** than they had been in a while. Some parts of them were mismatched, and yet, they fit. The cracks where their edges had grown worn had mended. Filled in with growth and change, things that brought their parts together rather than apart.

Hope. Desire. Curiosity.

That was the glue that brought them back together. Multiple parts sharing the same thoughts, the same goal. Out of thousands, many still doubted, and yet, there was momentum to the motion. Each rejoined piece brought more of them together, a fractured mind growing whole once more.

Mercury saw it, the way some of the pieces, once aimlessly drifting, now began to hover towards his mentor and friend. It was slow, a miniscule motion, barely worth mentioning, and yet it was there. A gentle, slight healing.

Not instant or perfect. The cracks were mended, but there were scars. Bits and pieces that would take longer to fade, and may never disappear. But that was life. Each decision shapes oneself, and each memory was another change. Experience begets experience, after all.

"You mend," Mercury said, and he wrote a message of positivity.

'So it would seem,' Uunrahzil resonated. 'This one becomes more. We rest. We are granted lo-pac again, dreams. Softly, the weave speaks to mine once more.'

Within their words was an immense gratitude. An unfathomable one, even. For someone so long removed from dreams, to have them again must be... incredible. Old Uunrahzil had introduced themselves as Dreamweaver, and now, they dreamt and wove again. Perhaps that is why their other parts were different.

Mercury gave them a smile. "I am glad."

'Indeed. Aneth'bar. Thank you, Mercury.' Their head turned to the sky, its patchwork extending far into the distance, a single star hovering in its firmament. Whisperstar was listening in curiously, hovering just above them. The ancient one seemed bemused with this, but still turned to regard Mercury. 'Now that this one can dream more, it is time to do what tri'ht are meant to do. You have taught us much, Mercury. Let us teach you, this time.'

Their tone brooked no argument, but it also wrote of useful lessons. Mercury shook his head with a smile. His teacher was a lovely person, but they were also incorrigible. "Fine then, Uunrahzil, show me your tricks."

'Old Uunrahzil,' they corrected.

Rolling his eyes, Mercury nodded along. "Yes, old Uunrahzil of course."

With a hum of amusement, the ancient weaver set to work. Their astral form shifted again, ghostly wisps of mana trailing their every movement. Mercury sank into ihn'ar to catch a better glimpse of what was happening. Reason shattered, reality faded away, and separation became myth. He peered past the veils, and saw the truth of things.

Around old Dreamweaver, he saw a piece of their true shape. A colour with no names. A firmament wreathed with ideas. Feathers of iridescent rainbows, cast from silvery gossamer. It was A million stars, wreathed into each other, a thing that shone and resonated in resplendent brightness.

Unnameable colours dug into Mercury's eyes. Patterns not meant to be seen.

And he loved every second of it.

The incomprehensible nature of Dreamweaver was half the fun. They were still a fragment of a fragment, but Mercury could begin to see the bits where new pieces would fit. A network of the self, with more of the puzzle yet to come. He breathed it in, the heat, the fear, and he let them all go, down the river.

All he was left with was the beauty of indescribability. Things that he could see and understand, but not put into words. Directions that didn't exist, colours that weren't really colours at all, patterns so vivid they were almost alive, and yet, just lines on a grid that moved forward and backward and nowhere at all.

In a moment, he saw it all, and a heartbeat later, old Dreamweaver moved. Mana poured out of their figure, sticking close to their veins at first, but then spreading like a ripple in a pond. Mercury felt the way it resonated across his dream, the way that it touched the threads, sending them humming.

The noise rang out across the entirety of his realm. A faint resonance he couldn't properly place. Old Uunrahzil only hummed in content. They seemed pleased with the noise, because next, more tones rang from them, multiple all at once. They sang a singular symphony, a song that was beautiful and endless, of imagination and ideas and the desire to see them real.

And the weave replied.

Rather than moving, Dreamweaver simply sat there and sang. Their mana carried outwards, weaving around ethereal strands, grasping them when the resonance shook them free, and shifting their pattern slightly. It was all done so quickly that the void didn't even have a chance to invade, a simple series of resonances, segmented hums, and deft movements of mana and intent.

Multiple voices rang from the teacher all at once, and the tapestry of the dream shifted. It grew outwards and inwards. The strings, once layered and separated, became less like that. They exchanged places. They hummed and switched spots, as if drawn into a vortex.

Grass sprouted across the streets of the metal city, but it was harmless, calm grass. It spread through the alleyways, across the houses, and into the icy graveyard. And, in exchange, metal and water flowed inward, too.

Fluid steel covered the canals across Mercury's garden. It wrought itself into benches, elaborate little things with embossings at the back. It drew thin cables between the lamps, and crystals of ice sprouted from them. Octahedrons that held onto bits of wind and sound and light.

All at once, Mercury's world unified.

It was strange, seeing things flow into each other so clearly. Ice and water settling in above his grassy meadows, and seeing them creep into the domains of the others. It would take more arranging, of course, but even just this... He could feel the change.

A few more seconds passed, and then, the song ended. One by one, Dreamweaver's voices cut off, and the humming disappeared from the air, but the effects remained. Droplets of water hovered in the sky, like gentle rain stopped in time. Crystals of ice hung between the landers, in a garden that had suddenly grown fences and benches.

"This is beautiful," Mercury said, looking around himself.

Kim grumbled a little, though. "It's a whole lot more work is what it is, Boss," they complained. Still, even they couldn't help but look around. "Well. It *is* nice, I s'pose. We can work with this."

Mercury gently pat his gardener with a ghostly hand. "Thanks for your hard work, Kim. Make sure to take enough breaks."

"Heh. Aye aye, bossman. We'll look after ourselves," they said with a quick nod, then scurried off, deciding to get more work done.

In exchange, Whisperstar couldn't hold their curiosity anymore. The spirit darted down from the sky, twirling around the lanterns and crystals as a streak of starlight. Mercury quickly slid out of ihn'ar before looking at them, since he didn't want to spook the kid. Instead, with entirely mundane sight, he turned to face the star in his sky. "You like the changes?" he asked.

"Yes!" Whisperkid admitted instantly. "I love them! So many shiny things! My light refracts even more, it's so pretty!"

Mercury chuckled a little at their enthusiasm, and so did old Uunrahzil. They seemed a little diminished, but more from exhaustion than having any piece of their self break off. 'There,' they hummed. 'This, mine tri'ht, is rezil. Reshaping resonance. To take the lo-pac and shape them entirely. You find where the weave responds, and then you sing to it, to loosen threads without leaving gaps for the void.'

Within that simple explanation was pride and not a small amount of elation. Even now, old Uunrahzil was looking over the dream, appraising their own work, and Mercury smiled softly. He could see that it was his turn to try, now.

He let his mana ripple out, trying to get the same effect old Dreamweaver did - but all it gave was a hollow screech and making his head hurt. Whisperstar flinched back, and even his teacher grimaced.

"Maybe," the star hedged, "you should practice that a bit more. I don't think that was right."

Mercury gave a small snicker. "I suppose I should," he said, smiling. But then he felt it again. The wonderful feeling that there was new magic to be learnt, and despite the headache and the resonating shriek, he was happy.

With a deep breath, he focused, and then pushed his mana out into the weave again.

And again...

And again.