

Chapter 244: Romance

“Okay, let's do this,” Mercury said.

“Are you sure?” Zyl hesitated. “I... don't know if I'm ready.”

“Don't worry,” Mercury reassured him, “I can handle it.”

Zyl nodded, slowly. “Okay,” he said. Slowly, warmth started to spread, then envelop Mercury.

“Oh wow that's hot,” Mercury said.

Then, his fur started to smoke. Despite the resistance he'd built up to heat, it couldn't stand up to dragonfire. A moment later the hairs caught fire, burning away with an acrid smoke.

Luckily they had decided to do this outside - in a spot prepared by Yasashiku, no less. It was to the back of his workshop, a smaller platform with high, multi-layered walls to insulate the heat.

The first layer started melting after a minute. It was reinforced stone, compacted into bricks and forged as magma. And yet, in front of Zyl's dragonfire, it burnt all the same. Mercury felt the fires brushing against his skin, his entire world enveloped in blazing red-white. There was nothing other than light and heat.

He took a breath, feeling the fire burn up his nose and into his lungs, searing his flesh. It should have hurt, yet it all fell into the <Still Mirror> of his mind. Maybe the pain was part of what defined fire, but if it was, Mercury would simply find another path.

As his skin began to bubble and blister, heating up in the unforgiving heat that seemed to eat away even at his mana and stamina, he sunk into ihn'ar. The roaring of the flames grew quiet, and the wind they whipped up calmed. One by one, distractions dropped away.

The ground beneath Mercury melted, turning into lava. It was kind of amusing, really. See, Mercury could choose to sink or swim in it depending on how he changed his muscle density and <Tempered Body>. He chose to stay standing on top of the liquid floor, even as it shifted under his limbs.

Lava burned at his skin, his bones beginning to liquify next. They would have burnt, but there was very little air in his body currently, and the pressure built so that they couldn't simply become gaseous and evaporate.

It was a horribly uncomfortable feeling, and Mercury laid down. Zyl's dragonfire burnt the very air itself, and Mercury's body began to fail. His blood boiled, his proteins searing in his own fats. His eyes were closed by now, and he ignored the distant bubbling sensation within them.

Instead, Mercury focused.

What was fire?

Clearly, it was washing over him right now. Dousing him. Stone melted, hair burnt away, the air itself whipped around him silently. Noise fell apart as the particles moved so quickly as to make it *irrelevant*.

The temperature kept rising. His body started failing in a dozen separate, debilitating ways, but he kept it together. He <Prevailed>. The evolution of <Survivor> said that wounds healed faster if he willed them to, and Mercury did just that. <Perseverance>, the Skill he gained from fusing <Unbroken> and <Unfatigued>, meant his will proved adequate.

Dragonfire raged. It furiously set out to devour everything fed to it. Mercury could feel that.

It burnt away at his will, at his sense of self, at the ground and at the air. It was all-encompassing and furious, raging, tearing molecules apart with the anger of-

That wasn't right.

Mercury discarded the idea of fire as anger. That was simply not who he was. More and more, the heat bubbled and streamed, the stone beneath his feet slowly beginning to move some more, as parts of it began to literally boil. Rock turned to gas in the terrifying heat of the fire.

He focussed more, listening. There was a hunger to the fire, consuming, disassembling. It fed off of other things, requiring fuel. It burnt away magic itself, tearing at anything even remotely flammable to keep itself going. Fire was starving-

No. He shook his head. That was wrong too. Mercury refused to let his fire be founded on the grounds of destruction. Even the required hunger that no living thing could avoid, because change needed energy.

Energy?

Mercury listened closely, once more. He brushed up against the ephemeral third veil for a moment, and paused. He listened. Practiced. Learnt.

There, deep in the fire, was a heartbeat.

It thumped, sending waves of heat throughout the world. Burning, consuming, moving... *dancing*.

The heart beat, and the world changed. Fire rippled across it, spreading, inviting, and, to some end, irresistible. When fire asked the air to dance, it danced. When fire asked the stone to dance, the stone moved. It liquified, it turned into gas, it broke and moved and changed.

That was the essence of fire - change that fuelled more change. Energy and motion, like an invitation to a party. Mercury smiled. Fire brushed against his skin, and he felt that tug, that wave, that beckoning finger...

And Mercury gently declined.

[The individual has acquired the ability <Fire (lowest)> through a specific action.]

[Level Up!]

He breathed out, and the fire brushed against his skin. It was still dragonfire, so, to some degree, he couldn't fully decline, but he could still ask it not to pester him. Of course, this contested Zyl's will, so it still burnt him. But not enough to overcome his resistances.

Asking a tiny bit of the fire more sternly to form into legs for him, Mercury walked out of the pit of magma he was in.

When the world cleared up and he saw something that wasn't white hot light, it was Zyl's face, torn between focus and concern. Then, when he saw Mercury exit the plume of radiance, Zyl's face brightened, and the stream of flames cut off. That thundering heartbeat quieted down again, and the flames abated.

The dragon quickly wrapped Mercury in a hug, and the mopaaw was sure to return it. He looked rather majestic, probably, with the fire still clinging to him like a mantle. He was planning to keep it that way until he could use <Shift> to make his fur grow back.

"I was worried," Zyl said.

"You didn't need to be. How much of your full force was that?" Mercury asked.

Zyl brushed his fingers through the flames that lingered above Mercury, the fire gently brushing against his gloves. He smiled. "About a third."

Mercury laughed. "Damn. And here I thought that was at least half," he said.

Slowly, Zyl shook his head. "Nah," he said. "If I went full force... well, I might've turned some of the air into plasma via heat only."

"Oh, dang. Ionize me, captain," Mercury said.

The dragon waved him off with a smile. "Oh, stop, you." Then, once more, he ran a hand through the flames. "I take it that it worked?"

"Yeah," Mercury nodded. "Brilliantly."

Zyl rolled his eyes at the pun. "You're a dummy, Mercury," he said.

"Sure am." Mercury took a moment to squeeze Zyl with his ghost hands, then looked at the little chamber they'd prepared for the experiment. Layers of wall were molten away, and a small rain of pebbles had fallen since the gaseous stone lifted up into the air, then solidified and came raining right back down.

There was, for sure, a lot of horrible stuff in the air in that little chamber, so Mercury took it upon himself to call down a quick <Rainfall>, washing away the damages. There was a lot of hissing and some steam, but by the end of it all, the rocks were solid again, and the air cleaned.

In fact, it smelled softly of rain. With a final smile, he turned to Zyl. He could deal with the third veil later. And his level took him to lv. 39, just one away from the next evolution. He'd probably get there whenever he broke past the veil. It shouldn't be too long, now that he'd found the shape of it...

Instead of indulging any of those thoughts, he discarded them. "Hey, Zyl?" he asked. "Let's go home."

"Gladly," the dragon said with a smile. "But get your fur back first. I don't want you setting the house on fire."

“Ah. Right.”

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“You don’t need to do this anymore, Lucia,” he said.

“Oh yeah?” the priestess asked. “Well, I want to.”

Mercury bravely endured the onslaught of golden flames. “And why is that?”

“Because I am angry. This lets me discard that anger, for once,” she said, almost cheerily.

“Why does that need me to be there?” he asked.

Lucia gave a sinister smile behind the veil of fire. “Because you burn.”

“What?”

“Fire doesn’t smell right if there’s nothing burning,” she said, seriously. “You? The burnt hair smell helps it feel real. Plus, there’s a hint of wood in there, too... cedar?”

“That must be from <Grass>,” Mercury said. “Or my shampoo.”

The priestess laughed at the admission, cutting the flames short. “Chuchuchu. You are delightfully funny sometimes,” she said, then haughtily turned. “Come. Let us do things in the city.”

Mercury tilted his head. “You wanna... do things? With me?”

She nodded. “Yes.”

“Why?”

Lucia glared. “Because we are friends,” she said, tilting her chin up. Then, to the sky, she mumbled quietly. “And Iris’ and my anniversary is coming up and I would like help picking a nice gift.”

At that, he smiled a bit. “Okay,” he said, plainly. Lucia smiled, too, though she quickly hid it behind a cough.

“Right,” she said. “Thank you.”

Briefly, Mercury thought about it. If it was their anniversary... then he must’ve been in this world for a while, now. Over 2 years, certainly. It was a little tricky to keep track since birthdays weren’t a huge celebration here. He must be, what? Somewhere between 38 and 40?

Oh gods.

He might be 40.

Suddenly, Mercury found himself *glad* to live in a world that did not often consider birthdays.

Shaking his head, Mercury found himself very skilled at directing his entire attention to Lucia and their little project. “What kind of gift would Iris like?” he asked.

“Something special,” Lucia said. “She likes dresses, pretty things, shoes, stones, flowers, jewelry... but something normal won’t do.”

“Propose to her,” Mercury suggested.

Instantly, Lucia combusted into an inferno, blasting him with a wave of fire that he gently beckoned into the sky, keeping it from accidentally singing any pedestrians. Lucia choked in the middle of the plume of smoke, coughing hard. Then, she broke out into a long bout of nervous laughter.

Mercury gave her a few moments to compose herself, then smiled a little. “What are customs for partnerships here, actually?” he asked.

She stared at him, then glared for a moment. “You didn’t even know?” she asked.

He shrugged. “I think I know.”

“You think??” she snapped, then dragged a hand through her hair. “No, no. It’s alright. Allow me to enlighten you. There are procedures, legal and religious, to unite lovers in the eyes of whatever institution they may be pledging themselves to. These rituals are different based on each institution, and range in terms of malleability.”

She gave a small sigh. “Most of them share a few traits, though. They require two or more legally recognized people to engage a Bond, and those people need to have reached adulthood in the eyes of the System. They then pledge to remain together for some amount

of time, generally upwards of a year, often forever, and for this duration pledge to share their belongings and troubles. Something along those lines, anyway.”

“That seems rather formal,” Mercury noted. “Does it not require love or somesuch?”

“Not at all,” Lucia shrugged. “It is perfectly suitable, common even, for friends to enter legal Bonds in order to ensure that they have someone in position to take care of one another in case of an accident or similar event.”

“Neat,” Mercury said. “How elaborate are the ceremonies?”

“They range from signing a form to a multi-day party.”

“What about the Church of Order?” he asked.

Lucia stiffened faintly. “Well,” she said. “There are separate procedures for platonic and romantic marriages.”

“Mhmmm,” Mercury hummed. “And you would want the romantic one, of course.”

“Right,” the priestess said slowly. “We would host a small reception for one day, mainly to sign the papers, a large party on the second, and on the third, a celebration that is entirely up to the couple.”

Mercury smiled as they walked into the first jeweller’s store. “And how would you, say, propose such a thing?”

At that, Lucia ran beet red again, and shook her head. “No! Absolutely not.”

“Alright,” the mopaaw smiled. “Then, let’s just see about a gift instead.”

With a stiff but grateful nod, the priestess took a deep breath to regain her bearing, then regally walked along the displays, browsing the many gems placed there by the purveyor of this place. Slowly, she let her eyes browse over many of the shiny stones. She hummed, dissatisfied.

“No,” she said, then moved on. “Nothing like that.”

Mercury just nodded, and they moved on to the next store.

And then the next.

And the next after that.

It was going to be a longer day, it seemed.

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"You look tired, my guy," Avery said.

Mercury laughed in reply. "Technically, I've not slept in a few pages."

"That'll do it," Avery nodded sagely. "Why not?"

"Inefficient," Mercury said with a shrug. "I don't need the sleep."

"Yet you look tired."

"That's cuz of the magic," Mercury admitted readily, then retrieved a gem from his inventory.

"See, Lucia wants me to help make a gift for Iris. Nothing we find in stores is good or personal enough. Needs to be a real proof of love, right?"

"Right," Avery nodded, crossing his arms.

"So, I ask Yasashiku, and he gives me some cryptic advice. Something about finding what's within and showing it without. Then he grabs a piece of coal, smacks it with a hammer, and hands me a half dozen tiny diamonds."

Avery chuckled, then nodded along seriously. "Of course, yeah. Logically."

"Since then, we've been experimenting with the gems. Yasahiku keeps throwing me more whenever we run out. Lucia blasts them with fire and I try to trap it within," Mercury explained.

"Makes perfect sense to me," the seeker's guildmaster replied. "And did you manage?"

"No," Mercury grumbled. "No, I didn't. Light is dang slippery. The diamonds are also like. Not hollow. How am I supposed to stuff something into a full thing? That's dumb. This is all dumb."

"Kahaha. You sure are a funny guy, Merc. Look, have you tried hitting it harder? That's how I solve my problems," Avery suggested. "Fact, if you ask, I'll smack the diamonds for you. Surely nothing could go wrong."

Sighing, Mercury took a few gems from his inventory. "Go ahead, then," he said. "Knock yourself out."

"Hopefully I won't," Avery retorted casually. He eyed the diamond critically, eyes glinting behind his sunglasses, then shook his head. "Nah," he said. "This won't do."

"What?" Mercury asked.

"I ain't kicking a diamond sitting on a wooden table. Marcel will literally kill me."

"Already bought the coffin," the receptionist provided helpfully. "Go on, guildmaster. See what happens. See what happens. I'll snap your neck, yea? Don't worry, it'll be quick."

Mercury giggled at their antics, then returned his look to Avery who shrugged. "Alright, where then?"

"Just outside?" he suggested.

Mercury paused. "Actually, I have an idea," He said, then smiled. "Don't get scared, now."

<Dream Manifestation> activated a moment later, and the world changed.

Wooden tables and chairs as well as the job board were replaced with green grass, rows of flowers and tall trees underneath a patchwork sky. There hung a silver sun and a nexus of threads, shining from above, as it softly rained. It was a warm, dim day, with long shadows and calming light.

Avery spun around, giving a low whistle. "Damn," he said, "where's this?" His head swivelled to an enormous tree, easily as thick as a house and five times as tall. Arber's avatar. "And what the hecc is that?"

"Faerie gift," Mercury waved him off. "Don't sweat it. This is my dream world. Or something like that, anyways. C'mon, let me show you a place."

The mopaaw took a step and the entire world lurched, the <Dreamweave> pulled along and distances became meaningless. A second passed as Avery and him remained <Itinerant>, and then, they stopped. They were in a patch of ground that way, in every way it could be, featureless.

Green grass over brown soil, and nothing else entirely.

Avery looked at it, confused. "What's this now?"

Mercury smiled. "That soil is harder than diamond," he lied. "And that's the <Truth>." A shimmer passed over the world, and suddenly, he wasn't lying anymore.

The godseeker rapped his knuckles against the stone. "Huh," he said. "Well alright then. You sure have been busy my man. Kahaha." His laugh was low, for once, filled with dark glee. "Then, I s'pose I'll let loose."

Monster replaced man.

Avery, the human, disappeared. In favour of him, there was Avery, the monster. Dark scales sprouted from his equally dark skin, covering it in thick armor. Claws sprouted from his feet and hands, and his face grew rather severe. Mercury could hear his heartbeat, even standing a bit away from him, as it faintly shook the ground.

Where Zyl's was strength and heat, Avery's heart was raw force. The kind it took to crush something to powder, to break bones and snap trees like twigs. He was *strong*. Stronger than he had ever been.

"You haven't been slacking, have you?" Mercury asked with a smile.

"Kahahaha! What, when I have someone like you setting the pace? Nah. I'd be ashamed of myself if I let myself look like a coward in front of my employees," he said with a bright, feral grin. "Now, spread out ya diamonds and lemme crush 'em."

Not needing to be asked twice, Mercury took out one of the gems, and placed it on the hard dirt. The earth shone with the vague power of an infused truth, one that shouldn't have been there and yet held. The weave pulled tightly at it, and the earth listened when Mercury asked, the roots of the grass holding it all in place.

There was a soft ringing when Mercury put down the gem.

A moment passed quietly. "You can-" Mercury started, but he needn't have.

Avery breathed out. For a moment, the world slowed. Mercury felt himself standing in a place awash with monochrome. Colour faded.

First, the shockwave hit him. Then the sound. A moment after that, he saw Avery move.

The kick came out so fast it broke the sound barrier. A thundercrack whipped out as Avery's leg cut the air, raising above his head and crashing down like lightning. Scales slammed

down on diamond so brutally that the earth shook. Wind smacked into Mercury like a wall of air.

Another moment passed, quietly, as Avery drew his foot back beneath him, and placed his hands together, centering himself after the sudden violence.

There was a soft crack. Then, the tiny gemstone cracked in half.

"Whew," Avery said. "I was worried I'd hurt my foot! Seems I still got it tho," he added, grinning, crossing his arms behind his head.

Mercury looked at the two halves of the gem. "Huh," he said. That was... new. Could he do something similar? Swing his *ihn'ar* and crack a diamond in half? It literally moved at the speed of thought, and he was pretty stubborn...

"There you go again," Avery chuckled. "Already thinking up some scheme to do something dang outlandish. Focus up, bud. You wanted to trap something in the diamond. Now you've got to halves. What's the program?"

"Right," Mercury said, looking at the two halves of the gemstone. He ran a paw across it, focussing on the way it felt, balancing on his two prostheses of ice. The diamond felt rough, but it had split along a lattice, one that was clearly there.

What did trapping something inside a gemstone even mean?

A diamond was a simple thing. Carbon molecules, bonded to one another, generally in layers. The bonds were hexagonal within layers, and connected up or down to other layers respectively. In a lot of ways, a diamond was a little like a slanted beehive of carbon.

So, how could he trap something within that? Scratches were akin to removing a small part of that lattice, leaving a mark. Creating a tiny hollow, that might refract light a little differently. Could he trap light that way? Not really. He wanted it to show outside, after all, so it couldn't be a real trap.

No, it would have to be more magical than that.

If he was thinking of magically modifying a material, then the first thing that came to mind was runes. What were runes?

Runes, in a lot of ways, were gaps in a material, filled by mana, that altered the material they were placed upon in some way. They were scratches. Gaps in molecular structure.

... Could he write runes into the atoms of a diamond?

No, that was probably a little too ambitious for him.

Then what? Could he scratch a diamond? Maybe, if he tried. Should he inscribe runes into it then glue it back together? Carbon atoms were a little far away from what he could do with <Grass>, even if it let him manipulate earth to some degree. How troublesome.

Did he need to split the diamond in half, though?

Well, testing first.

Bringing his *rijn* to bear, Mercury hardened his mind into a thin chisel, and a second *rijn* manifested to trap the diamond in place. He dragged his solidified will across the surface of the gem, without leaving any damage.

Inacceptable.

Mercury's mind was strong. This diamond had never made it through what he had made it through. Really, he was doing it a favour by letting it be part of a project he had with his friends. It should *want* to be scratched, frankly.

His mind hardened further, the needle growing thinner. It raked over the surface of the diamond again, unmarked. Mercury took a breath. A moment passed. His mind was the strongest, and that was the <Truth>.

Limits and reason faded away, as Mercury dragged the chisel crafted from his thoughts across the diamond, and left a scar.

Slowly, he grinned. "Take that, stupid rock!"

But he wasn't done. Making a cut with his *rijn* was not all that he needed to do. There was, after all, more work to be done. If the most basic part of a rune was a single scratch, a line, could he invert it, and make a rune from the <Dreamweave>? Or, if gaps were needed... <Nothingness>?