

## Chapter 250: Bleeding Heart

Zyl's heart beat and the entire mountain erupted into fire. Rock turned soft around him, glowing red with heat, and the human guise of Bael began to sizzle. Their skin cracked and turned even darker. Then, teeth grew from those cracks.

Maws began to open across the demon's body. Zyl frowned in disgust, but still punched again, activating <Stellar Heart> to power his actions. The power of an entire sun burned in his chest, and he slammed his fist forward so fast that the air screamed and boiled.

Bael twisted backwards, getting a glancing blow that still shattered bones, cratering the mountain behind him, sending molten stone splattering around. The air burnt around Zyl, a heat-haze so dense it looked like tiny flickers of lightning. Bael's maws grinned, tongues lolling out from sharp teeth, twisting into smiles.

They tasted the burning air. "You're a dragon," he said, matter of factly.

Zyl nodded. "And you're a demon. A demon ruler, I'd wager. Which number are you?"

Again, the demon's grin widened, splitting his face. Horns sprouted from his head, as his body snapped and twisted into its proper shape. They formed a crown of twisting black thorns, branching off like antlers. His scleras turned black, and his eyes a dark, glimmering purple. "I'll enjoy tearing your flesh."

"Careful," Zyl chided. "You'll burn yourself." His heart thumped in his chest again, the wave of heat so intense that some of Bael's teeth cracked. The demon hissed at the pain, yet still charged in again.

Except, it was hardly a charge. A giant maw on his stomach opened, and simply devoured the space between the two. One moment, they were distant, and the next, they were right next to one another. The demon went to punch Zyl, only to have his attack turned aside, as the dragon was simply far more proficient in hand-to-hand combat.

Bael didn't need to hit, though. A maw opened on the back of their arm, biting into Zyl's flesh with razor sharp teeth, grinding against and tearing into his ruby scales. Blood spilled from the wound, hissing as it met the demon's tongue, but still being devoured.

"That hits the spot," Bael groaned, eyes rolling back faintly. Zyl grimaced, punching the demon in the face again, sending him slamming into the stone once more. Lava bubbled and flowed over the demon's skin, bits flowing into his open mouths, hissing and burning.

Grabbing his jaw, Bael pushed it back into place, clicking his bones together, even as they twisted and grew. "Lizard was always one of my favourites."

Zyl didn't banter. Instead, he just breathed. His heart beat, pouring heat into the surroundings. He was growing warm, and he could feel it. Slowly, he called his memories of fighting back. There were Skills he had left unused for a long time, simply due to the fact that they were not suited to being used in a civilized place.

<Heat Diffusion>, <Flame Emperor>, <Domain of Incineration>, <Return to Ash>... one by one, his powers flickered on, fed by the star in his chest. Zyl breathed the incinerating heat, feeling just how close the air got to igniting in his lungs. He moved his hands, now turned to draconic claws, wreathed in so much heat that bits of plasma clung to them as he moved.

Bael shifted, growing ever larger and tougher. He grinned his hundred maws, and attacked again. A monster of hunger and strength, met by an incinerating flame.

There were bits of Zyl's own ruby scales covering the demon - some kind of absorption ability activated by eating, he guessed - but those didn't matter. Without his resistances, his own body would crumple against his fire. Bael was an idiot to try and fight him.

When the space between them disappeared, and the demon wanted another morsel, something very simple happened. He opened a maw, and his skin melted. The tongue was instantly turned to ash. Teeth cracked and exploded into boney shrapnel from the heat. For just a moment, fear flickered on the demon's face.

<Rending Fire>, <Flamescourge>, <Solar Furnace>.

The demon tried to walk backwards. <Spatial Fire>.

Behind him, space itself burnt away. His path of escape was turned to ash. Flames so bright they transcended colour began to wreath around Zyl. He breathed, and the air instantly turned to plasma in his lungs. It messed with the way this shapeshifted form should have worked, but that was fine. He had his <Stellar Heart>.

Within him, a fire burned. The world got to feel what it was like, now. And, in response, the world burnt.

“Dragonfire,” the demon hissed through gritted teeth, barely keeping himself intact, his flesh regenerating as it was burnt off his bones. “How terrifying.”

Zyl smiled, just a little. “Don’t worry,” he said. “My flame is special, even among dragons.”

Screaming with hunger, the demon threw itself at him again, teeth grinding against Zyl only to fall apart moments before they touched. His skin was even hotter than the world.

Breathing calmly, Zyl activated yet more Skills, meant to channel and control the heat he contained within himself.

Then he raised his hand, and a beam of it tore forward.

It tore right through Bael, burning a fist-sized hole through the demon’s chest. Then it burnt through the mountain. And then another mountain. It tore through all of the atmosphere of Chronagen, tearing forward in a straight line, only affected by gravity, but fast enough to escape the planet without stopping.

The beam of plasma escaped into the sky, leaving a faint hole in it.

Vomiting blood, the king of all demons laughed. “Oh, you’ve done it now,” he said. Finally, he entirely abandoned the human form. In front of the dragon stood a monster. Tall as a house, covered in terrifying maws, with claws and dark scales... a shifting leviathan with the best attributes of dozens of deep-sea horrors.

“Let me show you the horror that is hunger,” he said.

A domain of devouring essence poured out. It tore into the flames, and designated them a meal, eating at the heat, even as it dissolved into ash. Rows of teeth turned into dust, only to have that dust eaten by yet more maws. The hunger was infinite, looping in on itself, devouring the remains of what came before.

It was evolution. Thousands, millions of years of adaptation squeezed into a single moment. If a maw lasted even a microsecond more in the heat than another, its code was propagated and mutated further. Bael’s hunger was not as basic as that for flesh, it was a hunger for progress, for power.

A thousand rows of teeth dug into the fire, incinerated, and were replaced. Bael’s skin changed colours, rotating different configurations as its burning slowed. It stopped sloughing off his bones, instead smoking and blistering as it burnt. He caught fire, too, then extinguished himself.

Then, he took a step towards Zyl. Space cracked, and the ground fractured below them, creating a pit for the melting mountain to flow into, forming a lake of lav as the heat melted thousands of tons of stone.

Bael grinned an ugly smile with both the maws on his face. He reached out, and his skin melted away, leaving a charred skeleton. His bones weren't right. They were covered in protrusions, a little like a fish skeleton might be. The heat turned them black, but they didn't fall to ash.

Skeletal fingers closed around Zyl's neck. He tried to dodge, but the hunger pulled him back in. The hand, too, was like hungry rows of teeth, closing around him. Once more, his scales were crushed, and once more, blood flowed from those wounds.

They were barely an inconvenience, but power flowed from those gaps in his skin. Bael was devouring it, fueling his own adaptation with Zyl's heart. That, too, was fine.

Zyl gently hung there, held in a vice grip that crushed his throat, but he didn't mind too much. Instead, he simply tapped his tie, placing it in his inventory. It was a lovely tie that Mercury had gone for him, and he was reaching the point where unfortunately, any clothes not made from his scales would burn to bits, even if he enhanced them.

So, he said a mental goodbye to his current outfit, and summoned his armor on his body.

It was only natural that he had a set of clothes that could withstand his fire. Was he supposed to run around naked after each fight? No, that would be unbecoming. A ruby suit, woven from threads of thinned scale, appeared on his body. And then, he deactivated some Skills.

A partial calling on his true form meant that he needed to remove a couple seals. Spikes grew from his shoulders, pushing through the fabric. His elbows, too, sprouted sharp blades, and pristine, softly pink horns began to grow from his head. They curved backwards in jagged, geometric shapes, forming half-arches and graceful curves.

In a way, they looked like a runic enchantment.

When the flames filled the hollows within them, those enchantments activated.

Reality twisted. Time itself caught fire, sputtering out of function. Zyl moved in a timeless world, his hand snapping upwards. The air burnt to dust as it resisted him, and was simply

removed. His horns were powerful enough to commandeer their own Skill, the <Rose Crown of Desolation>.

Almost gently, he moved his hand through the space where, outside of burnt time, Bael's arm would have been. The appendage disintegrated before his touch. Mana poured from his heart in a torrent, his inner flame burning bright as the sun. He moved infinitely fast, making him the only light in a world of darkness.

And when everything was dark, the light became absolute.

He punched forward, lazily, straining against the hold of the world, feeling reality shake, and another arm of Bael's instantly turned to ash. A third punch tore a hole in the demon's stomach, to the point where his upper and lower body were connected only by threads of tissue to the side.

Then, time restored itself.

A torrent of heat flooded out of Zyl, leaving him gasping. The demands of his <Crown> were high. Almost too high. His heart tore mana out of the air, reducing the ambient density down to almost nothing. Zyl spluttered for breath, even as his throat knit itself back together, the tooth-marks disappearing in moments.

Bael vomited a torrent of blood, a similar amount erupting outwards from the hole in his chest. All around it, his flesh was scorching, but Zyl had entirely eradicated parts of his body. Half the demon's arms were gone, reduced to ash, and multiple organs had simply disappeared.

"Fuck," Bael groaned, painfully. "That hurts, you draconic bitch."

Zyl looked at the demon, who was somehow still alive. He drew in a breath of not-quite air, since it instantly ignited in his mouth. Still, he spoke. "What's your rank, demon?"

Again, those maws split into a grin. "Fine, you've earned it. Number one."

"What?" Zyl's eyes widened.

"Number one. Tippy top. I'm Baelzebuth," he said.

Frowning, the dragon waved his hand. "Then regenerate yourself already. What do you want from me?" he asked.

The demon's face fell. "What?! You're gonna stop, just like that? C'mon, at least lemme eat an arm or something!"

"No," Zyl rolled his eyes. "I'm not feeding you my body parts."

Bael grumbled in annoyance. "Fine. Stupid dragons. Never letting me get a proper bite."

"What do you want?" Zyl huffed again, annoyed. His suit was ruined, his throat ached, his hair was messed up by the horns. It would be such a chore to get everything cleaned up again. Not to mention the lava lake he'd made.

"Fine, fine," the demon said. His missing body parts were regenerating, if a little slower than usual. He took one remaining arm and scratched the back of his head, where charcoal black hair sprouted from his demonic visage. "Well, see, I was trailing a wandering archway, and I smelled its trace on your house."

Zyl blinked in confusion for a moment, but didn't need much longer to put the pieces together. "Ah," he said. "I see now." What had his boyfriend gotten himself into this time?

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Around Mercury, the ocean of glinting silver was no longer calm. Bits of metal laid strewn across it, thousands of discarded blades, the fury carved out of them, rusted and amalgamated by his Stifled Silence. He demanded the world be still, and yet, the ripples still spread from those broken bits of fury.

His entire body had been carved multiple times over. Enough so that he got another level in <Tempered Body> and <Combat Sense> each. He had knit himself back together and regenerated so often that <Hydration> had even levelled up twice.

[<Hydration lv. 4 -> 6>]

But by now, the endless anger that wrath had poured into him was exhausted, too.

They had fought for hours. Days, probably. Multiple times, Mercury's zeyjn changed shifts, another mind of his taking over when one of them was exhausted. The eternal war that raged across the steel forest was brutal, a violent dance of death where everyone lost.

So much metal had fed into the Stifled Silence. So much of it had been ruined. His flesh was cut, his blood was spilled, only to be once again devoured. The amber in the center of his crown had turned a reddish hue, fuelled by Mercury's own vital fluid, and the silver wreaths of it had grown after devouring so much steel, so much <Grief>.

Because, in the end, that was what he felt in the fight. There was no glory or happiness to be had from crushing wrath. Sure, he was happy that its violence would be slowed from now on, but he still had to be the one to break it, over and over and over. There was no fun in that. All he felt was a simple necessity, the same way he might feel a need to put down a rabid animal.

Sighing, Mercury focussed. His thoughts had been drifting more, as he drew further on <Grief>. Powered by his <Grain of Infinity>, the silver ocean that poured out from him, the domain that demanded silence, grew with each second. He killed more avatars of wrath, tearing the stars from the sky, and for some time, the fury grew with each kill.

Then he killed and broke more of them. They ate each other when he didn't dispose of them properly. Rage fed into itself, creating more and more of it.

Only to be shattered again.

And, eventually, there was no more spite to give. The anger broke, and could not rise again. The bodies falling from the sky diminished. The hailstorm of metal and sharpness slowed, and Mercury's body no longer spilled more blood. His tongue was dry and his eyes ached from straining, but he was alive. And the anger was dead.

Standing over the vestiges of smashed steel and irate iron, Mercury grieved. What a shame it was that the world would come to this. The way this twisted land of metal was made to be so hateful. He wondered, then, if the forest had always been there, and only twisted by wrath, or if it was wrath that spawned the steel forest.

No matter, now. After all, that forest had been reduced to plains. Mercury's quicksilver had swept the lands, and for miles, the trees had been flattened, as the Stifled Silence drank deeply.

Once, that woven crown had belonged to Yearning, a ruler that Mercury had, in some way, killed. Now, it belonged to him. It was his silence, his decree to demand that the world mourn with him. Wrath was silenced, fury fell on deaf ears, and the world was allowed to weep.

Rain fell.

Mercury looked at the starless sky. He absorbed the last bits of broken wrath, letting them be eaten up by his <Grief>. Steel dissolved into smooth silver, and flowed aside. Soon, the only thing that remained of the harrowing battle was a memory. A slightly larger weave of silver upon Mercury's head, and a slight shift in the hue of the amber gem of the Stifled Silence.

That was all that remained of wrath's great war. Wrath's last war. Where it fell against just one person.

He breathed in for a long moment, then out for even longer. Mercury looked in the distance. Wrath had fought him with each of the stars in the sky, but he knew there had to be something more. Some avatar of this abominable place, something truer than the horde he had broken.

Slowly, Mercury walked. With his step, the tide of silver flowed forward, eating into the trees, expanding a little more. It spilled out around him, an ocean of it, drawn as thin as he could make it and still devour the trees. He let it expand, since there was no reason to condense it. Maybe if he needed to hold this realm together, but there was no such need.

After all, he was here to break it.

With an ocean of gleaming silver at his beck and call, Mercury walked forward. The forest didn't put up a fight. Its mindless fury fell to pieces before he even got close. Steel tendrils lashed out pointlessly, splattered silver coalescing back into the flood. Trees toppled, blades of grass broke.

Mercury marched forward, an inevitable tide swallowing the world of steel.

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Blood.

Everything in this colosseum was so full of blood. Mercury's raindrops turned red the moment they hit the air, soaking up the scarlet fluid, not letting it go to waste. He refused to feed wrath with it, the voyeuristic spectators already cheering at the sight of it.

Instead, it all was soaked up by his rain, and cycled back into the Dream of Starvation. Gleaming, stygian steel ebbed and flowed at Mercury's call. It was stronger than ever before, being fed in a meal it understood. Having devoured Tor-Tern's bloodlust, now being fed by the endless waves of furious combat.

Another strike, another <Severance>. Limbs flew from a body, and Mercury was splattered in red before the gladiator was unmade, falling apart into loose threads that Mercury wove into a path. The Dream of Starvation slithered through his fur, picking it clean of crimson.

In the sky, the baleful heart of the colosseum was closer now. Mercury could hear his own blood rush in his ears, pulsing in time with the heartbeat of the star. The path was closer. The fury clawing at his mind stronger than ever. This core of wrath was one anchor - the heart of its dream. It was this part of his' duty to destroy it.

Breathing, Mercury let the rain cloud around him more strongly. It fell in an endless torrent, setting the red world awash with freely flowing water. The blood slickened the sand, sticky and everlasting, only to be drowned in the pouring storm. The world strained to contain it, and Mercury strengthened his footholds, keeping the loose sand from washing away.

He stepped forward again, and <Itinerant> carried him further than he ever should have gotten. The spectators were split between cheers and yowls, as he gave them what they wanted to see, only to ruin it. He came out clean, even after the killing. His heart remained steady, his soul remained calm.

Mercury took another deep breath, unravelled another handful of souls, and stepped forward again.

Distance crumpled as the dream struggled to stay alive. It spluttered and coughed against his serenity. The demands for violence grew ever more incessant. Never had this colosseum intended to be calm, never had it been meant to endure cleanliness. The sand was meant to be sticky with blood and fear and fury.

Unfortunately, that didn't matter. Even as the dream of violence wanted to fall apart, Mercury's understanding of the <Dreamweave> kept it held in place. Of course, he saw the tearing gaps where the void may come in, and yet, he simply strode across them. The world drifted in fragments, ripping, tearing, recombining, and he simply had to stride his path through it.

[<Tracking> has levelled up! <Tracking lv. 1 -> 3>]

And, of course, he had a guiding, bloody star in the sky.

Another step, another heartbeat, another wave of fury passing over him and streaming off him as the river in his mind carried it away. He listened to the rain, pitter-pattering on the soft

sand. He listened to the soft humming of the Dream of Starvation as it wolved down the blood. It was close to another evolution, he knew.

He listened to the storm flow around him, listened to what his storm meant.

Another step, another heartbeat.

He saw the tether holding the star up in the sky. When he had visited gluttony, the dream was starved, the nexus chained down, yet this one was different. A pillar of dead bodies, crystallized in red ruby, made of solidified blood, held it in the sky. It was a monument to decadence, to murder, and Mercury felt horrible indignation rolling off the corpses.

Each of them was furious to have died. Each of them wanted nothing more than to stab their killer through the throat and bring them down with them. These people had been broken long, long ago, reduced to spectres of this abominable place.

Mercury breathed, and a final step carried him across dark patches of void, across thin threads of dreams, and to the foot of the pillar. Another heartbeat washed over him, stronger than any before. Bloodlust clawed, roared at him. He felt the unending fury that wanted to consume him, the hunger for war and murder and desolation. The urge to destroy.

It was an eternal reminder of what he did not want to be.

After all, Mercury knew he was an angry person. He knew that he had a temper when it came to certain topics, that he could snap at people and be impatient. But that was not who he wanted to be.

And so, even as the familiar anger washed over him, the familiar desire for vengeance, he let it go.

That did not mean that he forgave. It did not mean that he forgot, either. He could be plenty angry at, say, his parents. He grieved their abandonment of him as much as he hated them for the cruelty. And yet, he did not want to tear them limb from limb. He did not want to spill their blood and watch it drain into the sand.

He hated them. But that was all, and that was fine.

The intense fury sunk away into crumbled bits of ember. Then those, too, were extinguished by the babbling brook. He did not forgive, did not forget, but he had moved on. He faced the future, he did not let the anger hold him back or control him. His decisions were just his own. He did not want to be an angry person.

He would be kind where he could.

[Your understanding of <Rainfall> has increased! <Rainfall (low) -> (medium)>]

A storm crashed into the pillar of blood. The crystalline construction was assaulted by winds and water, and instantly, it began to crumble. There was a furious resistance, a thousand wails from hungry wraiths who were holding onto their lackluster leisure of watching murder. Pretentious cowards who simply wanted to see everything burn.

Others' suffering was just their amusement, right? These people, dead and bleeding from eternally open wounds, how funny, *right*? No.

<Grain of Infinity> burned, and he turned up his Skills to eleven. Mercury would not watch these people be violated further. Soft water crashed into solid crystal, and the pillar broke. The bodies within unravelled, their wounds disappearing as their bodies were unmade. Rivers of blood were turned into bands of dreamy white, woven to keep the void at bay.

A veritable ocean of blood, feeding the pillar, poured into the Dream of Starvation. It fed the weapon, as it was used to end a nightmare rather than bring one. Mercury stepped into the empty air, supporting himself with <Force of the Hecatoncheires>. It was a bit awkward, but since he was doing shift work on his minds, his rijn were unavailable at the moment.

It was fine, still. He walked into the air, and the storm rose at his demand. The wind carried his steps. And he stepped upwards.

<Itinerant> burned, powered by the star that hummed in his chest. It spilled forth power, ruinous amounts of energy that let the Skill go further beyond what it was ever meant to. A single unsupported, impossible step, carried mercury dozens of metres into the sky.

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

The star was far up, and he would crush the entire pillar as he headed there.

Crystalline blood broke, and Mercury walked. The world fell apart, but Mercury held it in place. The spectators screeched in anger. Some of the ghastly wraiths rose from their seats, approached him, only to be torn to shreds by the winds of the storm.

The Cloudmatter Shawl resonated with the Skill, expanding into real stormclouds, pouring out even more rain. Lightning flickered alongside the dark firmament, charging his Dracoleather Cloak, and when he asked it to, he sprouted ethereal wings of crackling lightning.

He breathed. The storm welcomed him into its embrace and he soared higher on the winds. Furious lightning impacted the pillar, splintering and splattering the scarlet fluids, only for the rain to feed it to the hungry Dream that enveloped Mercury. Another step.

Another heartbeat. Wrath, clasing into the storm, slipping off, failing to take hold. It was, after all, pointless. Mercury did not want to be angry, and so, he could not be made furious. His heart was calm, even as the air roared in his ears, as the world buckled and broke, splintering into black patches of void.

Spectators shattered. Crystals combusted. Each time some of those manifestations of fury fell, Mercury felt a blip of something. A glimpse of connection, a thread tying them to the star. He saw the red heart, the nexus, beating, and he soared up higher.

It grew in his vision. An enormous monument to decadence, to exploitation, to instilled fury clawing at people's minds until they broke to become bleeding cogs in the system. Scapegoats, one and all, made to hate each other, and *for what?*

When his rain fell upon wrath's core, the heart was beating. When the storm descended, it fought with everything it had. It clawed, tooth and nail, with a ferocity only found in beasts. The heartless heart of violence morphed and shifted into claws and blades and teeth because it was all that it knew, and yet, when those implements of harm fell upon the Dream of Starvation, they simply fed the weapon.

Raindrop after raindrop, mercury eroded the nexus. Wraith after wraith, the spectators flew to their doom. The realm shook, rapidly being unmade, and the threads wanted to fall to the nearest point of existential gravity - into Mercury.

The entire world fell apart, and it fell into him.

Thread after thread, falling through his storm, cleansed of the permeating violence, adding to his story. When the time came, and this place grew too weak, too incomplete, Mercury triggered his <Dream Manifestation>.

His own world flowed into existence wherever there were gaps. The green grass devoured the threads, tearing into them and adding them to the mass that was his own inner world. His nexus, the silver star that had once been gluttony, wove each thread into the cocoon of reality that made his world. More segments of patchwork sky were stitched on. The misty rain of his dream domain joined the <Rainfall> around him, empowering the storm.

And the heart of horror at the center of wrath was washed away.

[You have killed the Heart of a violent Dream. Get: 10 000 Exp, 10 000 Gold]

[Level Up!]

In front of Mercury, wrath crumbled. A million broken, tortured souls, finally released from its clutches. The Dream of Starvation bathed in the blood, greedily eating the vestiges of wrath. The storm carried away the scarlet remnants, washing away the bits of the heart and the red that tainted the sand.

A world of violence was cleaned until none of that anger remained.

Mercury breathed in deep. He let the storm wash over him, knowing that his task was mostly complete. The dream of wrath was gone, forever. This part of him was left floating in the morphing, adapting dreamscape of his own, and island of safety in the void.

Kim, his gardener, was tending to the plants. Whisperstar flitted across the newly woven sky, exploring the way this realm had changed. Arber's avatar grew healthily, already well over a dozen metres tall. And Old Uunrahzil rested under the shade of that faerie tree.

Gently, Mercury smiled. It felt a little like coming here. He let the wakefulness of this mind go, dispelling the <Manifestation> of his dream, letting all of this, and even this part of himself, fade to irreality. Letting himself rest.

The grey metal of the Dream of Starvation floated off him, glowing with power. It had been fed a world of blood, and now, it would evolve and grow, he was sure.

[<Dream of Starvation>:

Grade: Bound C - Proficiency (1673/1000) - <Evolving>

Rank: 1 - Growth (2113/1000) - <Evolving>]

He let the metal hover around the silver sun. He breathed in the fresh air, free from the stench of battle for a moment. He joined old Uunrahzil under the tree. His teacher radiated a soft smile, and a promise of safety.

And then, Mercury let this part of himself sleep. The last vestiges of Wrath could be killed by the other version of him out there.