

Chapter 210: Rip and Tear

The walk forward, by itself, was frankly not that special. It was just placing one foot in front of the other. His motivation for doing so, though, was bright as it ever could be.

All around him, the world crumbled and reconstituted, in a never ending dance of death and life. He breathed within <Rainfall>, knowing that the air of this place would also try to unravel him, same as the ground did.

Mercury held his existence in one piece through sheer willpower, walking alongside Daryl and Alice. Deeper and deeper into this place.

He hadn't figured out what court it was yet, but he would do so soon, hopefully.

Minutes drifted by in silence, only interrupted by whatever thing was conjured up at any moment. Waterfalls, thunderstorms, avalanches... Mercury ignored them all, dulling the sound with his control over <Rainfall>.

More time passed, and Mercury felt himself losing track of it. Time seemed to speed up and slow down as it wanted to in this place, with no regard for the people in it. At least it never seemed to go to extremes - no days passing in seconds, or anything like that.

Occasionally, Mercury would blink and warp dozens of steps forward, which was a strange experience. And, one more time, he and Daryl had to stop and go find Alice again when they were separated.

Eventually, the world crumbled, and reconstituted once more, and Daryl inhaled a sharp breath. It was the first sound she'd made since they entered this place. She held up a hand to signal for the others to stop, and gently floated forwards, towards one of the amber pods.

She placed her hand on it gently, and whispered something to the person trapped in there. Mercury saw that it was a woman with rust-red hair, and fox ears poking out of it. Nine fluffy tails extended behind her back. It was Daryl's wife, then.

Mercury waited patiently, giving her the time she needed. A minute or two passed, then the old woman opened her eyes again, and nodded to her two companions. Looking at her, she felt even colder now. There was murder in her gaze. Mercury understood.

They started walking again.

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It happened on a step like any other.

Mercury suddenly felt a sharp *pull*. Stronger than any of the stickiness of this world. There was a distinct sensation to it, too, but he didn't spend a moment parsing it.

Instead, he focused. He was <Itinerant>, the only person to set the laws of his own travel, and that was the <Truth>. Crushing the pull with his Skills, he quickly reaffirmed where it had come from, twisted the remnants of that power to his will, and stepped through.

When he appeared, a trap of amber liquid snapped shut just a few steps next to him. He had evaded the trap that way. Alice followed, stepping through the wind, hovering far above the ground. Daryel did appear in the trap, but as the amber rose up, it was quickly crushed downwards, spilling across the ground, where it formed a puddle of crystal a moment later.

The sensation in the air was stronger now. Mercury took a moment to look around, delving deep into <Oceanic Consciousness> to think faster.

In moments, he saw it all. They were standing before a deep lake of orange. Amber liquid, sloshing around, seemingly another treasure that was taken into this realm. In the middle of it, on a small, rocky outcropping, there was a throne.

Crafted from roots and flower petals, ensnaring intricately carved stone, it was both beautiful and desolate. The greenery seemed to reach for the sky with a desire for more. But they'd dried up, now.

Rather than a beautiful green, or a mix of colours one would expect from so many flowers, it was a dull brown. Some of the stones had fallen out, the plants holding them in place failing. It was decaying, having lost colour and magnificence, yet still it reached up high.

Mercury understood. This was the court of *Yearning*.

And once it clicked, he saw its ruler. Draped across the throne was a ghostly apparition of body parts. It was a mix of creatures, bits of things stuck together with invisible stitching. Antler rose from a head that was nothing but a glowing, blank sphere, covered in delicate inscriptions.

With <Enhanced Vision> Mercury could almost read some of them, but they all seemed to say the same thing. "More." More. More. More. More-

He stopped reading. More body parts poked out from the thing's elongated body, draped around the broken chair like a mix between centipede and snake. Shimmering scales of white covered its entire body, partially translucent, so Mercury could see the mismatch of equally see-through organs inside it.

Arms and legs sprouted from it in every direction, taken from creatures he knew, and ones he didn't. There were even more heads poking out, some more vibrant than others. Snakes that hissed, and deers who barely moved their glassy eyes.

Mercury felt the urge to vomit. The entire creature - the ruler of Yearning - gave off an aura of unrestrained decadence, of desire taken so far it stagnated and rotted and fell apart. This wasn't something that died a slow death of circumstance, this was something that had broken itself because of a lack of introspection.

He paused that line of thought. Looked at the ruler, then spoke.

"Give them back."

It was a demand, not a request. In response, the ruler stirred, its aura intensifying and smashing into Mercury, making his knees buckle. But he was ready. His <Truth> screamed against that authority, and the backlash sent ripples across the viscous amber lake.

"M-more," the ruler groaned. The voice was raspy, a mix of dozens of dying voices, desperate, as if dying. As if more was their only salvation. As if-

Mercury shoved the thought aside. "*Give. Them. Back.*"

This time, at his words, the creature seemed to frown in indignation. Not that it could; but the featureless main head snapped towards him. The pressure redoubled, just as heavy as Titania's gaze, but Mercury stood. He'd done it once, and now, he was doing it more easily. He would never be crushed by something like this.

He stepped forward. The ruler's mood seemed to shift, from delirious yearning to one of curiosity and desire. It seemed to want him even more now. Dozens of mismatched appendages stretched towards him, elongated, many-jointed things rising up from its enormous body.

Below it, the amber lake stirred. It rippled, rising and falling, and finally, the whole ruler of yearning revealed itself. It was not *one* elongated thing. Behind the giant, crumbling throne, that serpentine body of scales and chitin split into multiple segments, which then split again. And again, and again.

Its massive frame rose from the depths of the lake, and simultaneously descended from the sky above. Its segments reorientated themselves, forming branching structures of limbs. It was like watching someone break their arm, over and over, until it stood in the shape of a tree.

Amber poured off of it like drops of putrid blood, the shape of the creature was a twisted recreation of something natural, something beautiful. Maybe a tree, maybe the shape of antlers - it still shifted and changed, and Mercury could never make sure.

Again, Mercury felt that urge to throw up. For once he struggled to find pity within him. This hadn't happened incidentally, this ruler had chosen to stop simply yearning and admiring, and instead start taking. Mercury knew, instinctively, that their body was made from grafting, rather than from simply being like this.

Piece by piece, its morbid corpus was assembled, like a masterclass on greed.

"*More*," it groaned with a thousand twisting, dying voices. Limbs reached out, and *grew*. Arms suddenly elongated, growing longer bones and more joints, twisting towards Mercury like fleshy vines.

He already felt their pull before they came close at all. They were a manifestation of power and desire, and in this realm? Every bit of it was within the ruler's reach. Its desire was spread throughout the entire land in the form of sticky amber and liquid crystal quartz.

Mercury <Severed> it.

Mercilessly, he channelled the Skill through the Dream of Starvation. He hoped the thing had nightmares of loss.

Enhanced by the power of his weapon, the air and realm twisted as he carved through it. A deep gash impacted with the ruler, sending flesh and blood and sharps of bone spraying like pieces of bark. Arms were severed, their disjointed, fractured bits falling into the lake below, as more of the arm shrivelled behind it.

Daryel chanted words that Mercury did not recognize, stretching out her hand as well, and a purple weight descended. It carved out a perfect circle into the stretching appendages, crushing them to a pulp, before sending them crashing into the lake, more amber sap flying through the air, mixing with the blood to create a translucent red-orange spray.

Alice, too, was approached by dozens of fragmented limbs, but when they got close, Mercury saw them torn apart in a bloody spray, violent winds twisting and tearing them to bits.

Violence reigned supreme on the battlefield, limb after limb being chopped off and regrown, fed into the darkening amber of the lake. Crimson mixed with orange, and the world shifted to reveal an omnidirectional sunset.

The sky turned red and pink and orange as Mercury stepped forward, into thin air.

His feet hovered above the amber of the lake, as he levitated himself. His mind was already split into his three zeyjn, each digging deep into their resources, maintaining platforms for him to stand on and swinging his Skills in the direction of the ruler.

“More.”

Dozens of branching limbs came for him, desperately clawing at the empty air. Amber sprayed upwards, splashing off the sides of his rijn, hiding the world in a spray of orange. Mercury stepped forward.

All around him, the wind picked up. His minds, all of them, sank into ihn’ar, and his heartbeat slowed. The golden veil shattered, then the iridescent one, and Mercury saw the world at its seams.

Shadows boiled around him, flicking aside droplets of amber before being forced back down by the sunset. Even more of the liquid was frozen as he radiated cold using his ice magic. Javelins, crackling with lightning, hovered around him and blasted apart any limbs that came too close.

Slowly, a storm descended around him.

Calm winds turned raging. Droplets of water manifested in the air and fell down, each one punching a fist sized hole into the spray of orange. Limbs twisted close enough to him, too many to <Sever> them all, and reached into his domain.

Water droplets slammed into them, turning them into a bloody mist. Mercury stepped through that red haze, seeing it get dispelled in front of him. There were worlds spinning in his eyes.

More and more limbs assaulted him, each one batted away. Dozens of arms, controlled by his ystirs, reached out and broke them. He walked forward, ripping and tearing at anything that approached him. He manifested his inner world, and suddenly a portion of the glowing lake was overgrown with grass. A portion of the sunset sky became patchwork.

Through the spray - through the blood and amber and the desire, he felt it, resonating deep in his bones.

"*Want*," the ruler moaned, unrestrained. Mercury's silver sun hung there, and it reached for it. The pull instantly appeared, the same that had almost torn him in half before - but this manifestation wasn't a weak one.

It wasn't an invasion of his deepest weak point, it was a declaration of his strongest domain. The grass was *his*. The sky was *his*. Mercury spun threads, ensnaring the reaching arms. He broke, and sliced, and weaved, and brought to bear his magic and understanding of the world.

This was who he was. This was Uunrahzil's successor. He would show this thing that his <Truth> stood above its.

He stepped forward across the amber lake, bringing a tide of green and silver. A node of stability to a crumbling realm.

And as he got closer to the heart of it all; the monstrous, swaying form of the ruler of yearning, the lynchpin of this realm of decadence... the sky around him fell.

This was a simple circumstance of the world. Decay would never last, by definition. It couldn't. Mercury's patchwork sky hung in the air, and new stitches appeared. The beautiful sunset was beginning to attach itself to his world. The amber lake was collapsing in on itself, the world melding and combining.

Threads of reality descended on Mercury, attaching themselves to him, like he was the last buoy, a tiny ship in the middle of an ocean of drowning people. They piled on, heavier and heavier, until the pressure became too much to bear.

Mercury felt tears of blood trickling down his face, but he walked on.

Amber spray hit him, crystallizing in his fur, but he walked on.

An entire world descended on him, and he walked on.

Daryl, to his right, moved her hand, and through the spray of crystal, he saw the way the realm warped at her desire. Her face was calm, a stoney mask, but he could see past it, now.

When the world came apart at its seams, an old woman raged.

Gravity roared around her, descending in droves of power. Mana poured from her core in a great tide. She waved her hand, elegant sleeves dancing in the storm. Her hair had come undone, now wildly blowing in the wind. She moved, and primeval forces obeyed - the world twisted, and collapsed in on itself.

With her robes billowing furiously, she brought to bear a maelstrom of magic, and crushed an entire trunk of the ruler in on itself. A part of it that was easily a hundred meters tall, and ten wide, crushing into itself, forming a tiny pearl of blood and bone and viscera.

She roared in silence, the words swallowed by the very fabric of the world itself screeching.

Then, on the other side, was Alice.

Her <Kindness> caused her to cry as she did so, tears streaming down her cheeks. They were clear; her face unmarred by blood. She seemed adrift, lost in the world as she floated in the air. The wind held her aloft because it wanted to see her free, after all.

Mercury could feel the grass of his dream sway for her, the air trembling. Even the amber, belonging to the ruler of Yearning, seemed to want nothing more than for the woman to succeed.

Where the world obeyed Daryel, Alice did not need to command it. The world acted on her behalf, because it wanted to. Because she was kind and that was what she deserved. Because she was a hero.

The heroine floated forward graciously, and none of the carnage touched her. Her lips trembled with sadness at what would happen, but she made the request anyway. Mercury wasn't good at reading lips, but with the time slowed down, he could tell what she meant.

"Please. Let this one end," she asked.

And the world listened. There was another great noise, one of motion. For a moment, all the pressure on Mercury stopped. The sky no longer weighed down on him. The amber no longer sought to climb into his dream. Instead, all of it, briefly, served the hero.

With one great push, another piece of the ruler was splintered, torn apart and broken by a thousand different tiny things. Fire sprouted from thin air. The earth moved apart to swallow it. Amber devoured it, and the sky descended with crushing pressure.

Amidst all of that, all of this greatness and power, Mercury stood. He wasn't pristine, he wasn't wonderful. His fur was matted with blood, that of the ruler and his own. His legs ached. His head burned, already. His cloak and shawl fluttered in the wind.

Thousands of malformed limbs reached for him, aiming to dissect him, then put him back together in an amber prison. And each of those shattered against him. As though chains of flesh being broken and splattered, carried away by the wind.

Mercury watched the cracks in the world grow bigger as it shrank in on itself. Clusters of threads, of reality, were drawn to where the powers clashed, the world becoming more stable to withstand it - to keep the void out a little longer.

For a brief moment, Mercury heard the call of <Nothingness>. The siren song of destruction, of simply carving it all apart. But he didn't want that. He wanted to break the ruler of Yearning. So he enveloped the creature in <Thread>. Wove a cocoon of power and violence, of spraying blood and crystallizing lake.

Grass from his mindscape bound the limbs, pulling them down into a sea of green. Shadows roiled and swallowed. Crystal clear water separated from the air, and froze around the limbs. Crackling lightning and javelins of bone tore them to bits, and invisible blades cut apart appendages, which then shrivelled and dried as their nutrients were sucked out.

Until, all at once, Yearning screamed.

It was after Alice moved forwards in a torrent, picking up some of the drops of Mercury's <Rainfall> that had ended up falling and wetting the grass below. They raged around her, and Mercury felt his domain spread thinly with hers, allowing the motion.

Within a moment, she carved out another deep wound, and Daryel capitalized, sweeping into the freed space, and crushing more of the tree with roaring magic.

Then, the screech came.

Thousands of mouths moved across its great abomination of a form, and thousands more opened on its scaled bark. The screech split the air. It travelled outwards in the form of a shockwave, hitting Mercury like an unavoidable physical punch.

It penetrated through his domain, and slammed into his chest, sending his bones rattling until some began fracturing and breaking. His entire body felt the strain, pain shooting through his veins, but he stood.

He survived.

Until the air warped. The shockwave stopped, having rolled across all three of the attackers, and travelled backwards. It rolled over Mercury again, and this time, the horrible noise made him lose vision for a moment.

The world went black, and he felt nothing. No sensation of shadows, or auras, or the weave. He felt no magic, nothing except a simple vacuum.

Violently, his body was yanked forward. Towards the great branching antler-serpent that was Yearning, towards one of the open, waiting maws.

Mercury tumbled through the void for a moment, before he opened his mouth, and roared right back. With brute force, he expanded his mana outside his body. It crashed into the ruler with barely a dent, but he <Witnessed> it.

For a moment, his very existence crashed into the thing. A small star, radiant and rising, crashing into the weight of a thousand dying suns, and briefly, the heat almost evaporated him.

But he was a <Survivor>. He was <Unbroken>. He was <True>.

With the desperation and fury of someone on the verge of death, Mercury deactivated <Still Mirror>. Instantly, icy fury flowed through his veins. He hated this thing. He hated everything it stood for.

This monster was a depiction of everything that had ever fucked up Mercury's life. He couldn't stand anyone like that - anyone that took, and *took* and kept **TAKING!!**

"No more!" Instead of winking out, the tiny star roared, making a <Bet>. He would not hide, he would not flee, and he would survive anyway. The brewing storm manifested, and the maw he was about to be drawn into was shredded apart by droplets of water. The shockwave of the scream halted, and Mercury crashed into the side of Yearning.

Its skin was spongy and slimy. Covered in sticky amber that crystallized in Mercury's fur. He felt it cling to him, and gritted his teeth. This creature would not win. Would never catch him.

Placing his prosthetic against the thing's slimy scaled bark, he pushed. A layer of fur and skin was ripped off of him, and the pain lanced across the side of his body to the point where he felt the breath halt in his lungs.

One of his zeyjn accepted that pain, and turned it into anger. A second manipulated his weight and the force he could exert to push him forward. The third <Severed> the thing's skin.

Mercury's mind was vast and deep. He pushed its entire weight into the monster, splitting it open, delving into the inside where translucent, glassy organs waited.

White, clear blood covered him. Red, sticky blood covered him. And orange, Amber liquid covered him, too.

All of it tried to turn him into a crystal statue. But he <Adapted>. He remained free, as was his <Truth>. He passed through, and entered the insides of the creature of Yearning.

His paws touched down on slimy ground, almost instantly encased, and he felt it shake from the outside, Alice and Daryl tossing more attacks this way. But Mercury ignored the shaking, the sickness, the disgust. He stepped forwards, and his storm carved a path through the winding insides.

That was the peculiar thing about <Rainfall>. It did what he wanted it to... so, it fell. And shredded the organs. Washed away the putrid traps released from within yearning. It broke apart the maws and teeth and horns and hooves that grew to kill Mercury. Then it pooled on the ground, and flowed downwards and upwards.

Violent rain covered the insides of Yearning's skin, never breaking it. It flowed like a tunnel of water, and carved apart the great creature from inside.

Wherever was in his way, Mercury <Severed>, until it fell apart and sank to be devoured by the waters. Mercury's rain was winning.

And he ran. For the first time since playing tag with Breeze, Mercury genuinely ran. <Drake's Wings> sprouted from his cloak, ghostly and ethereal. His sprint was clumsy and awkward.

His prosthetic didn't move nicely, and he hobbled, and the ground was spongy, and every limb he had hurt, and his bones were in the process of slowly breaking apart, but he ran anyway.

Limb after limb, he tore apart the creature from the inside. The tunnels branched off, and Mercury headed down ever larger openings, like he was following a circulatory system to the heart.

The power pressing on him grew heavier. Alice became exhausted, and the weight of the world descended on him once more. Daryl couldn't stop gravity on him any longer once he got too far away, and the weight grew heavier still. The shawl he wore began to crumble.

Yearning pressed down on him with its domain, with a thousand voices, with fury and greatness, and all the desperation of someone on their deathbed. Of someone who wanted nothing more than a single day extra.

Someone whose desire was great enough that they persisted through death.

Mercury ran, and ran, until he could run no more. Then he walked, until his bones shattered and his legs gave out. Then he *crawled*, dragging himself across the slimy ground, just a little further forward, just a little more-

And eventually, he could not crawl anymore. The pressure was so heavy, his lungs didn't expand to accept air, no matter how heavily he drew on <Rainfall>. The torrent of water had become barely a trickle. He was encased in a wall of half translucent organs and viscera, trapped inside a creature so much more vast and ancient and powerful than him.

But he was not one to give up.

When he could no longer raise his limbs to carry him, Mercury demanded his shadow to move, and push him forward. He froze the rain into a thin sled of ice under him, and it was carried along by liquid darkness. He ripped apart the organs, severing them with his mind, crushing them with his *rijn*, and tearing them with a hundred ghostly arms.

Mercury burned with fury and moved, even as his body gave out and his eyes failed him.

Even as his very heart stopped beating.

[The individual's physical body has died. Astral travel has become your main way of locomotion. You are vulnerable. Seek shelter immediately. Live, dum-dum!]

Feeling his body give out, Mercury drew his network of magic as tight as he could, wove more threads into himself desperately. He made himself as dense as possible, withstanding the crushing pressures of time and gravity and a world that wanted nothing more than him.

And then he walked forward anyways.

It hurt so bad his mind almost fractured, and his astral body unravelled. The place he was travelling through was no longer just a tunnel, it was a vast cavern. Within the translucent organs, he saw amber statues of other people, and he stepped past those, too.

He would succeed here. He would not fail. That was his <Truth>.

And so, his journey continued, and anything in his way moved out of it. Forced by everything he could bring to bear, <Itinerant> helped open up a path.

Mercury, dying and unravelling at the very core of his existence, moved forward. One of his zeyjn was devoured by the pressure.

A second one disappeared soon after.

His mind was stripped down to its barest essentials, to when there had been nothing more than a middle aged man looking to find himself. But he *had* found himself, so much. He had friends, loved ones, mentors, people worth *fighting for*. So he fought, for them.

And eventually, the wall of organs parted.

And eventually, the cavern opened up to a single chamber.

No more translucent lies of opulence. It was a simple, vast thing. The ceiling was so high he could not see it, only a vast darkness appearing in its place. The walls were a simple, glittering orange crystal.

In the room, there were statues. Thousands upon thousands of them. People. Of all ages, of all species. Some monstrous, some humanoid, some ethereal. Small and big. All encased and frozen.

Mercury made his way through. The amber stuck to him, crawled up his astral body, locking his joints in place. He withdrew even tighter, turning his whole being into a single, glowing sphere. A raindrop. A star.

He floated through, slowly, towards the center of the room, seeing a myriad of faces pass him by.

And then... 'Found you.'

The thought rang out in the hollow room. In front of him, there was a tiny sphere. An egg. Thin, translucent, membranous. It was white, covered in scales and bark and fur.

Mercury passed through that last line of defense. He entered into the deepest depths of Yearning, feeling that need push against him... and break. He didn't yearn that way. Didn't want that.

So its influence shattered and broke, and the castle of crystal finally cracked. Mercury stood in front of Yearning and denied it.

'I do not want you,' Mercury thought.

'Give back what you took.'

The thing couldn't make a move, but Mercury still felt its emotions. It was unsatisfied. It wanted more.

Mercury's self, weak, tiny, dissipating, screamed quietly against that. **'No.'**

Amber and quartz broke. The translucent membrane shattered. The thin, tiny creature at the heart of yearning, that had wanted to graft and grow and be real and take and take and take fell apart.

In a single instant, a new shockwave washed over the entire world, the great tree fractured, the antlers broke, splintering down the tips. All of it fell into the lake, until the lake itself froze over and broke into a thousand million shards of *nothing*.

[You have killed Ul'den'tyrel of Yearning. Get: A Wish. A World.]

Mercury wished for Uunrah-... no. Not yet. He wished for *growth*.

[Wish granted.]

Power flooded into him, and he knew it would never be enough to keep him alive. Mercury's flame was flickering in the darkness.

And string by string, thread by thread, the second 'reward' descended. A whole world crashed into Mercury. The nexus, broken. The silver sun, nearly stripped away. He was being eradicated by that pressure.

Facing death, Mercury smiled. He reached into his inventory, and withdrew...

[<Memory of Ash>: Once, there was a glorious past. Now, there is a ruinous present. Seek back to what was, twist the horrifying passage of time, and find yourself back at the beginning. When used at the end of a day, you may restart it from the moment you awoke - Not even the gods will remember. Once used, this item will also annihilate its own existence from all of time.]

A snowglobe. 'Please. Take me back.'

The ash whirled. Stormed.

The glass broke, another shattering crystal among the thousands falling through the dissipating sky.

In the truly dead realm of Yearning, crystal and ash and rain fell in a great storm. Then, they stopped, coalesced, wrapped around a tiny little speck at the heart of a star-storm, and time itself shattered.

Mercury felt a lurch, and a pull, and suddenly was back inside his fleshy body. He had skin again, fur again. The rush of memories and changes and Skills and powers and-

He threw up. Standing alone in the tunnels of Arber, having just entered the fae realm, he puked his fucking guts out.

Then he grinned, maniacally. "Ooooooh. Ul'den'tyrel, was it? You're so fucked."

In that last life, the price he paid was very nearly losing his life. This time, with the rewards he'd reaped, he would make sure to do better.