

Chapter 308: From Surviving to Thriving

Illuhm of the first light was a god.

A true, proper god. Mercury knew that the world had a spirit, that it rewarded him for closing certain wounds in it. He imagined that Illuhm was spawned by that as well. Something made to make the world liveable and protect it.

If Illuhm was real, though, Mercury imagined that the other gods were, too. In fact, the chaotic mess of energy, the heaven he had just passed through... were all of them maintained by the gods and the world spirit? The most likely answer seemed to be yes.

Especially the chaotic layer of swirling power. It was probably the essence of lots of divinities mixing. Ocean divinities, storm divinities, light divinities, fire and crafting divinities, nature divinities. The biggest question now was: If he killed Illuhm, what would that do to the world?

At least, that was Mercury's biggest question for a tiny, miniscule fraction of a second.

Then, his biggest question was something along the lines of 'Ah fuck how do I avoid dying?'

Illuhm sent a wave of incinerating solar flares towards him. The god of the sun was so nonchalant about it, he barely even waved a hand. Lances of fire simply lifted from his skin, each one of them already hot enough to burn atoms to cinders, and each of them enhanced by the curse that Mercury had suffered under for weeks already.

In a single moment, Mercury found his very foundational existence under attack. His memories burned away, like old polaroids in a house fire. He felt fire flow over him and it burned like nothing had ever burned before. Mercury came apart at the seams.

The sensation was close to what he imagined being unravelled was like, except so much more destructive. Mercury's power was fundamentally one of perception and rearrangement, meanwhile Illuhm's was heat. The nurturing heat of the sun, when far away. This up close, though? It was a perfect antithesis to life.

Sunlight washed over him like a torrential ocean, and Mercury died. His body was washed away into ash. Disintegrated with the force of a hydrogen bomb going through him. His mind torn to shreds by the invested divinity. Mercury, in a way, ceased to exist.

And then he existed again.

From a brief moment of nothing, Mercury <Resolved> himself. Not just his body, but his mind, too. One memory linked to another, and then another. It was a revisitation of each event in his life, spun together in a <Tapestry>. Connection by connection, atom by atom, he reassembled himself.

Illuhm stared at him. Mercury stared at himself.

[<Tapestry> has levelled up! <Tapestry lv. 1 -> 2>]

“Huh,” he said.

Illuhm tilted his head, more a rotation of the circle of eyes on the sunsphere. He stared at the creature in front of him that endured his light and did not die. Even now, that creature burned. Enveloped in a storm and metal, it reappeared where he had smote it.

Another solar flare wiped him out entirely. It was even more violent. He was reduced to ashes, raining down on the land. Mercury, this time, saw the magic coming, though. For less than a single blink. But he saw it.

<Magic> triggered. He redirected part of the attack - and yet more force turned him to nothing once more.

Disparate flakes of carbon drifted in the air. Then they slowly froze, and flowed towards each other, as if carried on a river. They flowed into each other, and from there, little threads connected them.

[<Mind over Matter> has levelled up! <Mind over Matter lv. 4 -> 5>]

It hurt. The pain was horrible. <Babbling Brook> was thoroughly overwhelmed. And yet, Mercury survived.

He was almost a little confused by it. He wasn't immortal, not by a long shot. Frankly, he wondered why he wasn't dead. This hurt, it hurt in a way that he couldn't even describe properly. Like standing in front of a too-hot cooking stove, then having it increase the heat until he was wiped away, front to back.

Mercury felt like a smear on an oil painting. Someone took a scraping knife and just wiped him off the canvas, then removed him with turpentine. And yet he was there, and regrew, like a piece of fungus, slipped between the cracks.

How would he describe it? Perhaps, it was that he had soaked into the canvas. Mercury was, at this point, more than his body, of course. He was also his memories and mind. This was also something that Illuhm attacked. His memories, his sense of self all burnt away.

So why, then, did he still regenerate? Was it the belief of others in him? His unshakeable resolve in himself?

No, Mercury was pretty frigging shaken by this point. Quite frankly, it hurt a lot and he really wanted it to stop hurting. But he still survived. He clung to life with the desperation of a madman.

“Why do you not die?” Illuhm asked, his voice full of confusion and annoyance.

Indeed, why didn't he? Another solar flare turned his body to less than ash, instead reducing it to a scattered mass of protons, electrons and neutrons. He was turned from a solid to a plasma in a single, incinerating blast.

And then, he regenerated.

His skeleton snapped back into place from another dimension. The plasma was assimilated into his body, suddenly behaving like biological matter. Purple, burning air formed into muscles, the scattered elements crystallizing into phantom-flesh. His skull grew a layer of raw tissue, then covered it with skin.

Mercury had a face, for a moment. His <Magic> was growing stronger by the second, resonating with the chaotic environment, breaking it apart. He survived, regenerated, was wiped out once more, and then came right back to life.

Why? Why did he refuse to die?

[<Babbling Brook> has levelled up! <Babbling Brook lv. 2 -> 3>]

Some of the pain faded, clearing his mind. Tattered, burnt memories clung to who he was. What he wanted. The people he cared for - not names, or faces, but feelings. People who were close, warm, important, who he wanted to meet again. Also people he disliked. He thrived in order to spite some, too.

And, then, there was a voice in his head.

[The integrated assistant has recorded the dum-dum's limited intelligence to a reasonably reproducible degree. In the case of near-total annihilation, a restoration is nonetheless possible using the impact the individual has made on the world and the System.]

Oh. He had soaked into the canvas.

The oil paint that was shaped like Mercury was wiped away, but not thoroughly enough. Illuhm might burn him, but Mercury had left his fingerprints everywhere. In the <Tapestry> that connected him to other people, in the way he had changed the world and reality itself, and even in the very Void that this world needed to be protected from.

Mercury had already slipped between the gaps. He had gone to a place where Illuhm's jurisdiction was flimsy at best. To the fae realms, to the Void, through tunnels, and his own Dreamscape. His Nexus, too.

All of those held records of him. Of who he was, who he cared about. How could he ever forget himself when he was tied to so many things? How could he ever let this world go when he *loved living* so much?

There it was. The <Truth> that was buried at the heart of it all. Mercury fucking loved being alive. More than anything else. He adored this world, he adored the people in it, he adored the fact that he got to eat, travel, learn, rest, and everything else.

No frigging way was he dying to some idiot god who hated him for being... what? Too cool?

Mercury laughed. He laughed at the hilarity of the sensation as his body was wiped out once more and his world consumed by agony. It was kind of funny to think of. His nerves were wiped out so quickly that the pain really was more of a phantom sensation. It was his mind telling him that he should feel pain.

Pain was just a warning. A warning that things were going to go poorly. And, like, what did Mercury care? If he was made from air or ash or plasma, none of it mattered. His memories burning was a phantom illusion peddled by Big Sun. He'd be fine, he'd remember.

Frankly, this shouldn't hurt. He shouldn't find this so horrid. He smiled, wider and wider, the grin splitting his face. <Perceived Ease> kicked in, and some of the unspeakable agony faded.

Left with a dull, throbbing headache, Mercury still struggled to focus. But that was fine. Even when a little distracted, his mind was above and beyond prodigious. He was being wiped

away, yes, but with every solar flare, he was learning. Adapting and growing quicker and quicker.

<Magic> pointed the way forward. He simply had to grasp, twist, and deflect the flares of sunlight. He had a whole elemental ocean around him to make use of, too! The other gods had so *kindly* donated him this weapon, so he might as well make use of it, right?

With the idea that only a complete idiot would ever come up with, Mercury wielded his <Magic>. It was a display of excellency, of the incredible understanding he had with this world and reality itself. He asked, and it obeyed.

Elements shifted as he beckoned them - ones that should never have been under his control. It was akin to someone asking his <Rainfall> to part. As long as he was invoking it, no one else could take it over.

But the gods were arrogant, passive things. When Mercury reached out to the soup around him, there was no intent there. Only the desire to crush and destroy. Mercury didn't even have to fight it! He just painted a target on Illuhm's back.

<Magic> resonated with the world, and when the solar flare came, Mercury watched it. Instantly, his eyes, his very senses frayed and burned away to nothing. He had caught barely a glimpse. It washed over him, and reduced him to smithereens again. And yet, he stepped forward.

That had been a little weaker than before, hadn't it?

He smiled. He felt so happy. The solar flare came, and he saw it, learnt it, deflected it, combatted it. He survived, he stepped forward, he loved it.

"What's so funny?" Illuhm demanded, his voice a cruel, disgusted rumble. His arrogance dripped from his words, crushing Mercury's sense of self. He should never laugh, he didn't deserve humor or fun. In the glory of his light, nothing else could exist.

Mercury laughed anyway. "I'm happy!" he said, smiling brightly. "I'm so happy, because I get to live, because I get to see things like this."

It was true. In his old world, he would never have dared to look directly at the sun. He couldn't have ever cast this kind of magic, just pulled the world in front of him. These days, he could grab onto plain air with his hands, do a million minor magic tricks, live off of nothing but a book for a month or three, and happily float through the air whenever he wanted to.

How could he *not* fight for that with his life on the line?

[<Truth> has levelled up! <Truth lv. 9 ->10>]

[Truth has met the necessary qualifications for-]

Mercury stepped forward before the message could finish. <Itinerant> triggered once more, with all the force of a thunderstorm. Rather than gently opening a path, it tore it open. Mercury was meant to be incinerated. There were unimaginable quantities of power in the air.

It was like walking through the shockwave of a nuclear explosion. Like wading through a field while battered with asteroids. The chaotic slurry of power, suffused by Illuhm's stellar brightness, should have stopped Mercury.

But at the end of the day, he was a free cat. He would go wherever he wanted to. For half an inch in front of him, the world was consumed by <Rainfall> and <Mercury>. Droplets of water hit the ground, joined the molten metal, and swirled around his legs in a torrent of quicksilver. Waves of it pressed outwards against the chaos, his own storm holding it at bay.

A few inches of storm that followed where he went. He simply had to move half an inch in an instant, then another half-inch, then another and another.

With a single step, Mercury flickered. A dozen afterimages surged through the Heavens, leaving a tear in the chaos that suffused everything. Mercury tore forward, because he was free. He breathed in, even as his lungs turned to ash once more. And then, he laid a single, solid punch on Illuhm's face.

[<Itinerant> has levelled up! <Itinerant lv. 9 -> 10>]

[<Itinerant> and <Truth> have met the qualifications for evolutionary fusion! Evolve? (2400 Skill Points)]

<Carve> triggered right when he hit the god in the face. Clad in the Dream of Starvation, his punch had turned into a claw, leaving vicious iron teeth embedded in the god's pristine star-sphere. Brilliantly white plasma oozed like blood from the wound, the metal melting to slag. But Illuhm looked shaken.

A tiny chip was left in his sun. And unlike Mercury, he didn't regenerate instantly.

The mopaaw, for his part, was a little conflicted about the cost, but decided to just do something he should have done a while ago. A few quests had given him levels he could redeem whenever. Right now, he was at 1800 Skill Points, and 6 banked levels.

So, he triggered them.

[Level Up!]

[Level Up!]

[Level Up!]

[Level Up!]

[Level Up!]

[Level Up!]

His stats surged. 120 Points, 60 of which sank into Willpower, and another 60 into Vitality. And, of course, another 60 to spend however he wanted. Mercury smiled. He had the Skill Points now.

“Evolve,” he said, right as Illuhm wiped his existence from the face of this world once more. 1800 points turned to 2400 as he levelled. Then reduced right back down to 0.

[Evolution confirmed. Engaging. Please pick an option to evolve the Skill into. The price will be the same (2400 Skill points), no matter which you choose.]

[Choice Overwritten. Overwhelmingly powerful Skill detected. Generating. Pause.]

Mercury was wiped out once more. But he still laughed. Overwhelmingly powerful, huh? That was nice. He thought it would be cool to have one of those.

Things changed around him. The world quivered, the very fabric that held everything together beginning to draw tighter, into itself. Mercury’s body started to spill with rainbow light, a prismatic sort of power that was generated somewhere inside him. It was scintillating, beautiful, and the same kind of reality-radiation that the godvein that Kang Tae-Yoon had shown him.

Radiation that would poison anything that was seen as less real. The kind that Mercury had braved even as his skin dissolved. Now, it spilled from his skin in great waves, refracting the chaotic light of this brilliant Heaven.

Illuhm's eyes widened. The god stepped forward, closing the distance himself. Mercury's rain ground against the sun and evaporated. Illuhm struck him - though calling it a punch would be inaccurate. Mercury's body, mind, his everything dissolved long before the fist even made contact with him. When Illuhm struck, all that was left was a perfectly circular hole.

In a moment, the god's dozen arms had entirely removed every fragment of Mercury from this world. Like a piece of paper being burnt away, it all disappeared. And yet, more prismatic light spilled out. Then, it formed the vague outline of a body. Of a mopaaw.

The god punched, and tore through the brilliant radiance. It, too, turned to ash, and yet more spilled out. More and more and evermore. The system would not let even a god interrupt this evolution.

Mercury breathed. He stood as a cloud of prismatic light, formed into four paws and an elegant tail. His fur was a beautiful, silvery white, with purple patterns that glimmered like rainbows when perspectives shifted. He was made from faceted fractals that were equally beautiful and mind-bending, and he stood in front of a god that wanted him dead.

And the silver metal that gathered at his feet rose up.

<Rain Fell> and turned to <Mercury>. <Mercury> lifted off the ground, and slowly drip-dropped upwards. As if falling in reverse, it travelled through the air at an agonizing pace.

The god struck it - and his fist paused. He could not scatter the rising droplets. Could not burn them. An incinerating flood turned Mercury to ash, but not his domain, not his rain, not his liquid silver. He refused to disappear, he was too obsessed with staying alive.

Droplets gathered around the Stifled Silence. They gathered around that instrument that he had reclaimed from Yearning. The diadem that wrapped around his head in patterns of vines, with an amber gemstone set into it, slowly lifted off him, carried higher by the streams.

Bit by bit, silver enveloped the beautiful patterns that Yearning had left behind. It consumed it.

[The Stifled Silence is being absorbed.]

A single message informed him of as much, and yet, Mercury didn't feel loss. The System was, after all, very careful about maintaining old functionality, so he knew that everything the Stifled Silence had done would be maintained.

With a swift motion, Illuhm wrapped his fingers around the crown. He narrowed his eyes and pulled. The world itself strained at the force. It was brutal and violent, enough strength to tear trees from the earth wholesale, to rip apart steel and entire buildings with nothing but force of arm.

His fingers dug into the building peaks. The metal did not yield or move, even a millimetre. Illuhm pressed until his fingers bled.

“You will not have this!” the divine decreed dominantly.

His willful ignorance was pointless.

The flowing silver gathered, coalesced, and grew. From a diadem into a crown. It still held the same vine-like patterns, with only a few prongs poking upwards. It was an elegant, flowing design that held a certain regal authority, and yet spoke more of kindness than cruelty.

In a single motion, all the iridescence that spilled from Mercury flowed into it. The once-amber gem turned pale, then held a swirl of colour in its misty midsts. Like staring into a cloud at sunset.

Mercury breathed in, then out, and then the crown settled on his head.

[You have acquired the Skill <Silver Crown of Understanding> through evolutionary fusion!]

Like every other Skill, it started at level 1, but unlike every other Skill, it was also a thing of immense power. Mercury felt his <Grain of Infinity> spin out torrents upon torrents of energy simply to maintain the crown. It was an incredible weight on his head, enough to make all four of his legs buckle, to make his foundational self quiver. He felt like he was staring down a giant hole, like the open ocean was laid out in front of him.

And a smile spread on his face.

Mercury had always been curious.

Without a shred of hesitation, he let the crown show him its changed world. And Mercury, all at once, understood.

