

Chapter 251: Separation

There had once been a vast world of steel.

Trees made of needles. Grass shaped like blades. Filled with creatures more sword than living, filled with things meant for violence, competing for sharpness

It had been a land of brutality and savagery. Where beings butchered relentlessly. Where bodies were crumpled and carved apart. Where life was all about killing.

Unyielding metal sliced through soft flesh, spilling blood that was devoured by the ground itself. Steel begot steel, and writhing branches of cutting metal jutted from the ground like spikes.

Anything that walked was impaled or cut apart. Malevolently mauled and brutally bisected.

That world of steel was gone.

Violence had been turned into *past tense*.

Brutally butchered bodies? None. Sinister songs of steel? Erased.

An entire world... was flattened.

Mercury stood in front of a bastion. A single, titanic castle from cold metal, resisting the waves of his liquid silver. It was the only bastion. This world had been devoured by the stifled silence, and the tides of <Grief>. And in doing so, Mercury had understood.

[Your understanding of <Grief> has increased. <Grief (medium) -> (high)>]

There was plenty to grieve. Every lost life, every branch of malevolent metal grown from spilled blood. He saw it all, broke it all to the ground, and grieved for everyone who'd died. Because those people, humans, sipisc, elves, dwarves, even a draconic child, they deserved it.

He breathed, slowly, and an entire world's worth of silver slowly flooded around him. The domain crawled closer, bit by bit, and he saw that the Stifled Silence had evolved to Rank 1.

[Stifled Silence:

Grade: Bound A - Proficiency (139/1000)

Rank: 1 - Growth (266/1000)

Attributes: <Vast>]

[<Vast>: The Stifled Silence was always meant to be a zone of sincerity. Of truth. Where words are only spoken when they matter. Now, it reaches a whole realm. Falsehoods and noise are done away with, and in the vast ocean of resonating quicksilver, there is a simple truth. Sometimes, one must *listen*.]

The bastion had defenders within it. Though, calling them defenders was rather generous. Really, there was a mindless legion of automatons. It was another manifestation of violence, another more insidious one.

In the last residence, the last wellspring of wrath, there was systemic violence. A coordinated, armed force of centurions, meant to bring down low any who oppose. To create scapegoats out of the entire world and spread fear. In the truest of ways, it was an army of puppet soldiers, held by a single puppeteer.

At the very center of wrath, there was a creature that Mercury would kill. He did not yet know what kind of creature that was, he didn't know its powers, but none of it mattered. It'd die, anyway.

Silence reigned. In perfect quiet, with not a noise at all, an ocean of quicksilver flowed across the flattened world. Rid of violence. Its heart, shattered. Mercury had reduced down this terrible place of anger to a shadow of its former self. In a way, it was a little like how Finva of Dust had reduced the once opulent realm of gluttony down to the ashen plains.

It survived, it grew again, but Mercury would leave no such chance. The colosseum was shattered in a way that the faerie could never have done. The champion of wrath was still in that realm, rather than lost and somewhere else. But not for too much longer. Wrath was done.

Minutes passed.

An ocean of quicksilver gathered.

Titanic, shimmering waves of a silent storm behind Mercury. For the first time in hours, he spoke, at the walls of the bastion.

"Break," he commanded.

His voice rang out crystal clear in the silence, a demand that the world had no choice but to <Answer>. A <Truth> that was amplified by his previous silence.

Metal shattered.

The bastion wall shrieked as bits of it wanted to tear from one another. It would be mended in a heartbeat, but a heartbeat was all it took. In a moment, the tsunami crashed into the castle. Cracked walls were torn down by the flood like fragile glass.

Horrible rending shrieks of tearing metal were silenced by the flood, silenced by Mercury's crown of vines. Metal walls and towers fell apart into shrapnel, disintegrating like a sandcastle swept aside by waves. An army of coordinated soldiers, each one reinforcing all others... shattered.

They crashed into the ground, getting torn to shreds by unwavering masses of silver. Mercury stood with a sad look in his eyes. There was no joy in killing a world, even if it was necessary, if it was the right thing to do.

Waves of silver rose and roared, fell and fractured fragile soldiers. Bit by bit, metal was shorn. The castle fell in the span of ten heartbeats.

And, of course, within it, something stirred.

Wrath had a single champion left. The most angry creature in this realm. It burrowed from the ground, stirred by the violence. From the center of the castle rose... a mantichore. It had the heads of a lion and a dragon, the wings of a bat, and from its back, there was a scorpion's tail - except, instead of the stinger, there was a gun.

It looked at Mercury, eyes blazing with scarcely contained fury. A raw wrath spilled from it, so enormous that the silver ocean was pushed aside, split as if cut by a blade. The tail took aim, and fired.

Somehow, Mercury had not expected a gun.

Being on the receiving end of one was bizarre. He'd avoided them like the plague wherever he could. Even when he still lived on Earth, he was only held at gunpoint once. And now, during his second time ever, he was shot.

Despite everything he might say about wrath, the manticore could not be called a bad shot. The bullet roared towards him with indignation, cutting a line of scarlet light through the air. It pierced into his right ear, pulping the flesh. It tore through his flesh, mangled the bones around his eye socket, smashed through the inside of his skull and exited out the back.

Bits of bone and brain were splattered into the silver sea. Mercury felt a part of his processing power fall and slide away. His brain was splattered in some ways. It was hard to put into words - in part because those bits of him might have just been pulped. And yet, despite it all, his zeyin snapped back into place.

A second part of his mind stirred, taking the place of his physical brain that was just torn to bits. His own blood and viscera coated the Dracoleather Cloak, but soon sloughed off. Bits of red dripped to the ground. Mercury breathed, letting the pain flow along the <Babbling Brook>.

Wasn't it funny that even with his brain in tatters he still needed to use the Skill to let the pain pass him by? He noted it with dull indifference, as the second bullet hit him. It landed in his chest, tearing into his collarbone and getting deflected to the side. There, it tore through one of his ribs, then a second before finally exiting out of his body.

Dispassionately, Mercury activated <Hydration>, <Shift>, and <Resolution>. Silver string of flesh wove and pulled the wounds shut, as new bones sprouted within his chest. It would take him a bit to regenerate, but he did not need two eyes for this.

After all, Mercury saw everything around him. In his domain, nothing could hide. He <Grieved> the lost parts of himself, and fed that grief right back into his tide of silver. Amplified by his own marrow, the tide surged against the bladed aura.

The manticore shot again, but this time, the gun barrel found itself faced with an ocean of shiny metal. The bullet crashed into the waves. And there it suffocated.

Quicksilver solidified into grasping, reaching tendrils. A forward whirlpool breaking the momentum of the bullet, then swallowing it entirely.

A third of Mercury's mind stirred, woke, and joined the fray. With three of them puppeteering the ocean, he created grasping tendrils of liquid silver, shooting at the manticore. It roared, biting and splitting the metal. The aura of wrath oozed from it in thick clumps of red, like crystals of blood, severing the flood.

Bits of silver turned crimson, splitting apart. But then, there were more limbs reaching in.

Wrath had been an army. An unbroken flood of steel. And yet, all of it had fallen. One by one, ground to dust.

Now, an entire ocean was at Mercury's beck and call. If he was in danger from a gun, he would simply break line of sight.

Blood still oozing from the remainders of his eye socket, silver bands of a material that was neither light nor flesh weaving around the back of his head, Mercury sank into the ocean. Slowly, the waves rose higher, devouring him. He did not need to see, because the world could not hide its secrets from him.

"Drown," Mercury commanded. The words rang out, into a world that was already fragile, already consumed by his silver storm, and his decree was enforced by his silver crown. When he told it to drown, the manticore may have strained, but the world itself listened.

Plains of metal where there had once been violence drowned in quicksilver peace. The ground that had once been covered in knife-like grass was now flat, and crumpled in on itself like aluminium foil. The sky crinkled and crashed in on itself, falling into the ground. The two met at the edges, then crumpled inwards, breaking into pieces.

The manticore screamed at it, but its roars suffocated, too. Red fury pooled out from it in a cacophony of violence, but it simply would never be enough. Silver silence flowed into both its maws, clogging up its teeth and drowning the monster. It was angry about that, too, but it would never be angry enough.

Second by second, the world shrunk. There was a pressure outside that should have been a vacuum, but wasn't. The void itself pushed in like gigantic hands, and the reality broke and tore and shredded itself, until every millimetre of it was filled with an ocean of silver.

Because, unlike the fragile realm, the silent silver storm around Mercury did not break.

It held the shattered bits of the world together. The discarded, crumpled edges simply drifted into the ocean, and the quicksilver flowed out to mend it. Mercury's nexus fed off of this world, too, and slowly, the crumpled sphere that remained was polished from the inside out.

Until the manticore roared again.

Blood red violence spilled out, cutting the ocean. It clipped Mercury's heart, carving right through his ribcage again, and spilling a bit of crimson from him, only to find bands of silver

closing the wounds, his body shifting. He grimaced, forcing his heart to keep pumping, his blood to keep flowing, letting the pain drift away.

Blades of unrestrained fury cascaded out through the ocean. Gashes were cut then flooded back with silver, but those rent's in reality also cut open the sphere of this realm. The manticore, in its death throes, had opened up the way to the Void.

Mercury felt it before his adversary ever could.

<Nothingness> pooled at the edge of his awareness, just a hint outside his silver sphere. There was a gap, a moment of pause in his protection of this realm. A single wound carved into an unblemished surface. Colourless ink hungrily flowed inside that dead space. Fraying threads discontinued, consumed by that wound.

The Void appeared. It crawled inside his ocean, then all at once, spread.

Like an infection, any bit of silver touched by it was torn at, corrupted, devoured. The remaining chunks of wrath he'd not yet absorbed were bitten and chomped at by the touch of that vast, empty, horrible nothing. Out there, his silence was worthless. There was no sound, and yet, it roared. There was no anger, and yet, it caused violence.

Shredding through his silver at breakneck speed, Mercury <Manifested> his dream. Green grass bloomed, instantly turned a shiny metallic colour as the Stifled Silence covered it, drained the colour from the world. But that verdant life from within him kept the void at bay.

It was imperfect, but he didn't need perfection. All he needed was a few more moment.

The ocean shook with the death throes of the manticore. Bullets flew out, blades of glowing red fury flew through there. They sought out Mercury, wanted to make him bleed, but it was too late. He saw them now. Dodged them, now. The thing roared and shook and stirred, but he simply walked towards it.

And then, with his Dracoleather Cloak, he channelled a ton of electricity through his ocean.

A bolt of lightning zapped through the metal, striking the monster, charring and melting its metallic flesh. The Cloudmatter Shawl swelled with dark lightning, and another explosion of it flared, echoing the first. Yellow-purple lightning tore through the space of metal and emptiness, breaking and shattering the remainders of wrath, until that last star was extinguished and consumed. Until it drowned.

In the end, that was how wrath died.

Not with a scream or a roar, but with a crumpling whimper at the center of a stormy, silver ocean.

[You have killed the Avatar of Wrath. Get: 25 000 Exp, 9 000 Gold, <Fragment of Electric Fury>]

[Level Up!]

[Level Up!]

Mercury took a deep breath. There was a ringing in the air. From where the manticore had been, there was a string that he plucked, that resonated as it shattered, sending a ripple through reality. It was another brush with the third veil, one he felt ever more clearly. But there was more to be dealt with, still.

He felt the way his Cloudmatter Shawl stirred. It had taken the lightning from the Dracoleather Cloak, and now, the fragment was absorbed by it, too. Back when Yasashiku made it, he'd said the item would be easily bound, and now, that time had come, apparently.

And it resonated with his cloak as it did so

Green leather was consumed by the shawl, scintillating lightning crawling along the blob of fused material as the void encroached. With a gentle sigh, Mercury sent it to coalesce in the safety of his mindscape. Wrath was gone. He had feasted on it.

The grass around him disappeared as he dispelled his dream. A while ago, he had received a Skill. One he'd not been planning to use for a while, one he'd wanted to use when he felt ready. But now? It was time.

When his dream disappeared, and Mercury was stranded in the gaps between worlds, <Voidwalker> triggered.

Mercury blinked, and his perspective changed.

There, in the Void, there was <Nothing>.

Absolutely nothing.

In a very substantial way, Mercury did not exist. There were titanic leviathans all around him, ones that could swallow planets, even stars in single bites, and yet, none of them existed at all. There was no weave. There were no dreams. No life, no sound.

Everything about him, everything about this place, was fake.

A moment passed, and Mercury's not-heart didn't beat. He didn't see anything stir in the emptiness around him, and he didn't hear any of the million not-sounds. And, at the same time, he saw everything. Every moment, every world, every realm was a single step away because the space between them was nothing at all and he could so easily cross it with a single thought.

Of course, thoughts didn't exist there at all, so Mercury did not think. And yet, he existed. His reality was frayed and out of place and yet, it found itself inverted, through <Voidwalker> and a twist out the other side of <Grain of Infinity>. The white hole at his center turned black and inverted him inside out, turning him into a shadow of a shadow that wasn't real.

[<Grain of Infinity> has levelled up! <Grain of Infinity lv. 1 -> 2>]

He didn't tilt his head at all, and he didn't wonder what this felt like, because the notion of feeling anything was silly. He didn't take a deep breath.

[<Voidwalker> has levelled **DOWN**. <Voidwalker lv. 1 -> 0>]

And somehow, that reduction of his Skill to nothing, an inversion of an inversion of an inversion in a way that shunted him out from reality and forced him to exist in a place that didn't exist at all... made it easier.

He not-breathed.

Gentle rain didn't fall. Black droplets ascended upwards towards clouds that were below him. It swirled and twisted around him.

On a <Babbling Brook>, Mercury let all those terrible, unparseable sensations fade away. He could not tell what was happening, but all he had to do was allow it to wash over him.

<Lucidity> fell through the inversion of <Grain of Infinity>. Its effects were twisted and returned in on themselves. He fell into a <Trance>. A half-asleep, half-dreaming thing where the irreality was a little more bearable.

[<Voidwalker> has levelled down. <Voidwalker lv. 0 -> -1>]

Ah, negative Skill levels. How lovely.

The very thing his survival was now based on sat at a solid negative one. Below zero. And yet, he felt its effects. The way that the <Nothingness> grew a little less turbulent. He took another not-breath, and slowly, gently, sunk into ihn'ar.

Where everything was one, nothing was distant. In a way, this Void was everywhere, so he was, too. In a way, it didn't exist at all, so he didn't, either. Where did it all loop around? Like a snake eating its own tail, everywhere looped around to nowhere. Like a quantum particle in a superposition that enveloped the entire universe with its waveform.

Mercury lifted the golden veil of reason. The iridescent veil of reality parted like a gossamer curtain. And he stood in front of the third veil, one that had seemed so distant for so long.

Except, he saw it.

The curtain was white. It was an opaque, perfect white. The kind that was so self-evident, so simple, there was no reason to ever doubt it. Like the walls of a flat, freshly painted, it was...

Separation.

It was the white veil of separation.

Mercury gazed at the idea that things were separate. The very concept that stopped him from losing himself in everything and everyone else. The idea that he was on his own. That there was something like distance between people, staring down the artificial barriers he put up himself.

Very gently, Mercury's lips twisted into something that wasn't a smile. He tapped that wall of white, and it rippled, then shattered. The veil of separation was torn apart, and revealed the truth of connection.

His eyes bled. His heart exploded into crystalline shards of- it didn't matter. His body was ravaged. Blood spilled through his fur as that thing barrier to the outside unravelled. Mercury was everywhere, and he didn't exist at all, he was ouroboros, he was infinity, he was the space between a particle core and its shell. He was...

Who was he?

A gentle rain fell.

Liquid silver swirled.

Pinpricks of magic littered the sky.

Mercury breathed in a place where he shouldn't have. His skin stretched back over muscles that weren't there at all. A broken heart beat in his chest.

[Your understanding of <Nothingness> has increased. <Nothingness (medium) -> (high)>]

His name was Mercury Rainfall Starlight. And frankly, he wanted to go home.

What a silly idea that was. Everything was connected, and everywhere in this place was the same. Really, he was already home.

Mercury took a breath. He closed his eyes. When he opened them, he smelled plants and paints, cake and fire. He smiled.

"Hey Zyl," he said. "I'm home."