

Chapter 258: Sprawling Spiral

There was something both haunting and meditative about unmaking a person.

Sitting among an endless nest of threads, Mercury felt a little bit like a spider. He didn't have as many limbs, of course, but his mind and Skills made a good alternative. In fact, with <Force of the Hecatoncheires>, he kind of had a thousand hands. Which was way more than any spider he knew of, quite frankly.

And so, using his ghost hands, Mercury reached into the very core of the envoys of envy and moved around the constituent parts of their personhood. There was a strange kind of rhythm to it. A pattern that they shared that went beyond the core of hunger at their centre, beyond the need to steal faces and consume lives.

A sort of... heartbeat, if he could call it that, of life. The web of traits shifted occasionally, as if carried by some unseen wind, and Mercury dealt with that, too. He reached through gaps, created clear paths, and then unmade the infectious cores that sat at the middle of those webs, knotting them back together.

It was always imperfect, and the way he reconnected the threads made him think a little bit of how surgeries often required stitches once they were done. What he did, as a procedure, was not perfect or flawless. He was, after all, messing with someone's mental equivalent of internal organs.

Doing something like that without any kind of lasting mark would be difficult. Maybe some day he could do it - but for now, there were scars. And despite that, one by one, the skinstalers volunteered.

One by one, they changed.

Oh, they remained shapeshifters, of course. Still perfectly capable of altering their appearances - but the obsession with consuming new lives was gone. More than once they would break down and weep tears of joy after he was done.

It was just a little creepy. "Saviour," one of them gasped. "How may we repay this-"

"No, absolutely fucking not," Mercury interrupted. "Let me stop you right there. You are not starting a cult. No, we're not doing that. No."

Somehow, that news seemed to upset them. “C’mon,” one of them asked. “We gotta do at least a little bit of the cult stuff. That’s what shadowy assassin organisations are for!”

“I will literally ask Zyl to set you on fire.”

Their eyes drifted to Zyl.

“I will literally set you on fire if he asks,” the dragon said with his arms crossed, nodding sagely.

At that, the skinstealers deflated. There were more than a few sighs and even a couple of grumbles. Aurora began softly reprimanding anyone who did complain, and Mercury gave a soft snicker as he set back to working. There were still more things to change, after all.

Slowly, the minutes ticked by. At some point, Otto was the first to approach the group of altered skinstealers. They really needed a better name, Mercury thought. Then again, they were still perfectly capable of stealing skins. It wasn’t the ability he took from them. So really, maybe the name could stay? Skinborrowers didn’t have as much of a ring to it. Plus, it was way too close to *skinburrowers* and that was entirely off the mark.

Otto sat with them, and simply talked. In fact, at some point, he reached into his inventory and took out... sandwiches. Ones he had made himself. They were filled with meat from different types of creatures that he’d probably violently beaten to death. They also had what looked like a few different kinds of vegetables and some kind of very crisp leafy green.

Since things did decay in the inventory, Mercury wondered how he managed to keep it so fresh. Probably some kind of food preservation Skill. Was Otto the type to have that kind of Skill?

Mercury looked at the man, the way that he smiled ever so faintly, fangs poking into his cheeks, as he handed out meals.

Yeah. Otto was that kind of guy.

And then, he focused on the tapestry of string, and time ticked by. The sun rose on the ethereal lake, glittering on its surface. Iris and Lucia, at some point, approached the altered skinstealers, and when being reminded of the once-assassin’s existence, many of them apologized.

There was a *lot* they had to apologize for, Mercury knew. He saw a chunk of it, after all. Given who they were, he could guess some of their memories. But that was not his place to judge. He breathed.

Iris forgave them. Somehow, despite everything, she forgave them. Not instantly, she said, but she wanted them to become better people. Because that is what they were, now. Perhaps, that was Mercury's gift to them.

Personhood. The thing that humans so arrogantly call *humanity*.

Threads wove, connections to that sin disintegrated, and Mercury would roll the unravelled web back up when he was done. One by one, he worked on the skinstalers, and each one volunteered just a little more quickly. When the stun stood high in the sky, it was finally done.

Every single one of the once-thieves sat with Mercury's friends. Zyl, though, was beside the mopaaw, even as the last of them went off. He ran a hand through his fur, smiling gently.

"You did good," the dragon said. "I really do mean it. These people look happier."

Mercury smiled tiredly. "Yeah," he said. "It's not perfect, but... at least it's *better* than what they had before."

The dragon nodded, scratching Mercury's head and looking up at the sky. "Mh. It is. Perfect is silly, anyway."

"Yeah," the mopaaw replied. "Perfection is very silly indeed."

He looked at the gathering of people, and smiled faintly. Then, he closed his eyes, and let the tiredness wash over him. Rewriting people's existence at their core was still a rather exhausting activity, apparently. "Hey Zyl?" he asked.

"What's up, Mercury?" he replied with a smile.

"I'm getting real sleepy, and the realm of Envy is about to descend in about three minutes. Please keep me safe."

Zyl blinked. "Huh?" he asked, but by the time he opened his mouth, Mercury was already out cold. "Huh??" he repeated, even more stunned. There was a brief silence. Then the air started rumbling.

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When Mercury opened his eyes, he found himself in the middle of the air, rapidly tumbling towards the ground. "Uh oh," he said, before crashing into the stone-like texture of Otto's hand. Before he could even ask, the giant man already set him down.

Despite a cracked rib or two, Mercury took it without complaint. His body was already knitting itself back together, and despite the relative shortness of his nap, he felt... reasonably refreshed.

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

Right on cue.

Then, a second later, something large and heavy slammed into Mercury, sending him flying again. A moment later, he crashed against something in mid-air, slamming through it. Then he smashed through another thing, and then hit the ground. He would be giving better descriptions, but it was pretty hard to notice anything other than blurry colours after waking up and rapidly spinning in the air.

Despite those complications, he did manage to rise to his legs again, dusting off with a bit of <Rainfall> as the dirt slid out of his fur. He looked up, trying to get a sense of where he was, and found himself met with a world of grasping hands.

Everything in this place sprawled outwards. It was a cascading series of grasping, reaching limbs, twisting out and out and ever further out. They wrapped around each other, trying to pull one another down... and they also wrapped around anyone who entered this place of Envy.

That was a ghastly sight. Things that had been drawn *in*. People - or what had once been people - of different species, clutched in grasping hands that just barely approximated buildings. A cityscape of reaching arms, entombing their corpses into their fleshen walls, but only after taking everything they had.

He saw fingers, covetously clutched around bits of jewelry and metal, bits of flesh and bone, and still reaching further. Because whatever they took, it would never be enough. Because someone else would have something else. And so that must be coveted, too.

The very ground he walked on was made from limbs, too. White bone constructed the ground, already grasping and pulling at his legs, trying to drag him under in the sprawling, endless expanse of reaching. The sky was made from hands, too, and when Mercury looked

up, those hands reached ever downwards. Shifting, cascating hands of shadow that wanted to tear out his eyes.

Decay and rot permeated this place of theft. The hands constantly stole from one another, from everyone and everywhere, reaching for just one more thing to hold. Fingers wrapped around his eyeballs, as he saw this realm for the first time, and he felt them pull.

And he waited as they failed.

More hands put the ones already grasping at him out of the way, in a cascade of sabotage. Envy was a thing that, by default, destroyed itself. Whenever a hand grasped him, the others pulled it aside. Even as they reached into him, as if to disassemble him from the inside, Mercury simply bore with it.

His skin didn't split, and his flesh resisted. And then, stygian steel spilled from him.

The Dream of Starvation wove around him, and all at once, the hands recoiled. For a moment, they felt fear, and then, the Envy won. They tried to grab at the armor that now surrounded Mercury. Tried to pry at the storm that suffused the air around him, but they could never touch it.

Even though they had the ability to take what was unseen, they could not take from Mercury. They could touch the storm, but broke against it. Scraped against the surface of the metal, only for bladed spikes to sprout and tear into them.

The metal armor grew almost organically when touched. Barbed spikes blossomed from it like a bramble. They burrowed into the reaching fingers and set them stiff. A heartbeat passed as Mercury got his bearings, and then he looked for the core of this place.

Usually, that should not have given him trouble but... the other.

Zyl floated in the air, glowing brightly with a million flickering flames darting out to incinerate reaching hands into ash. Otto had only briefly stopped his rampage to catch Mercury, and was already tearing everything apart with his bare hands again. Lucia was surrounded by golden flames, each arrow shot by her setting more of the sky on fire, lighting up the tapestry of hands like pinprick stars.

After all, that was what the three of them were best at. Mass destruction. Taking a place and causing a disaster.

It was why Zyl so rarely used his flames at home, why Lucia kept cool as best as she could and why Otto generally stayed away from settlements. Because in all of that, they were exercising control. In the same way that Mercury didn't walk around with his <Rainfall> constantly enabled, lest he break something he didn't want to.

Somewhere along the lines, they had all decided to try not to hurt others with their powers. Which is why when Avery showed up in the realm of Envy, things began to spiral rather quickly.

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The essence of Envy is an outward spiral.

Most sins latch onto people. Gluttony expands in an area, Wrath an even smaller one, trapping one person and their surroundings in a dome. Those are simple to run from - just stay away from those you wish to avoid hurting.

But other sins are not like that.

Envy, for example, sprawled outward. It was easy to forget what it did, but Envy is about taking. Not the direct sort of taking that comes with flaying someone's skin, but a more sneaky one. A shifting theft that seeks to steal anything that is held dear.

So, Envy manifests as a sprawling spiral that travels outwards. First it reaches for a person, then it travels along, and takes the things they love. Their favourite food from their home. Their favourite games. Their pets. Their lover. Their kids.

It is an insidious disease that thrives on the very idea of enjoyment. It snuffs out any light in someone's life before consuming it entirely. The covetous fingers will reach and steal wherever they can.

And thus, when an arm reached up to grab Bael's wrist, he wasn't even surprised.

With a gentle sigh, he waited. From the arm grew another, then another, then another. They sprouted like moss, growing and grasping, enveloping his arm first before expanding outward, like a flower spreading its petals. A hundred palms closed in around Bael all at once, and suddenly, he was in the realm of Envy.

An avatar of Gluttony, sent to another realm. Because of their connection. Because someone liked him enough.

That was a bizarre thought. Maybe he could have rationalized it as being drawn in by Mercury, who had absorbed the heart of Gluttony, but that wasn't the truth. Instead, the infection had simply spread that far.

Usually, Envy would not spiral outwards too much. It would hit a limit of exhaustion, and stop drawing people in, and yet, this time, that limit wasn't reached as fast. After all, someone had stolen from it. Bael smelled it in the air, the thick, cloying stench of desperation. Of hunger and want.

Something stabbed him in the back, and Bael turned around, seeing a feral skinstealer. The poor thing was almost ravenous with hunger, with the pure, unadulterated want to tear his face off and put it on. To wear his corpse like a skin, to steal his identity, to sleep in Stormbraver and rule over the demon cities.

Bael scoffed, reached out, and bit its head off.

The world was made from reaching fingers. They were pulling in people rapidly, dozens of humans manifesting all over this place. Hands reached for them now that they were here, envoys of this place trying to tear into them. And it hurt to see.

Just the same as Bael had before, it was indiscriminate. Envy's desire to own and possess spread out and tore into people. There was a slow, insidious part of its nature. It would target things of the most perceived value first. Often, the arms only grabbed jewelry or purses, and then they'd move on to things like limbs and skin, and finally reach for ephemeral qualities.

Steal someone's kindness or happiness, tear their love from their hands and leave them husks.

And yet, unlike what Bael expected, the people fought.

A dragon hung in the sky, frowning deeply as he controlled his flames. An older monster, skin crackling with lightning, darted through the crowd, shattering the thieves. An archer with a bow, an assassin weaving through the crowds, Avery, Marcel, the old blacksmith...

Everyone from Stormbraver thought. Bael watched as an old woman took one of the envoys into a chokehold, dragging it to the ground. He saw a kid with an oversized mage-hat case

an icy lance and impaling one of the arms reaching for them. He saw adventurers swinging their axes, bakers swinging their rolling pins, and kids swinging the sticks they played with.

And, of course, Bael moved. When an arm reached out to take Marcel's healing, she shattered it without blinking. It was a noisy affair, fragments of growing bone splintering off into the distance, though not a single one marred his back. Marcel was kneeled over a kid who had a scrape on her knee. "There," he said, casting a spell. "All better."

He smiled that same, calming smile he usually put on when interacting with people, and bravely, the girl nodded. Then she hopped to her legs, and headed off to a dome of ice, maintained by some kind of water-elemental. Bael tilted his head. The girl moved quickly, with a bit of wind under her feet.

Then, her eyes widened.

She saw the heroine. Alice. Beloved by the world, she whispered affirmations, and the wind assisted her. It took the kids to safety, it parried lethal blows, turning them into glancing ones. Oh, it was still bloody, but the world helped the weak as she asked. Even as the kind heroine worked with a mournful smile, though, people were hurt.

Buildings from Stormbraver were taken. Pulled into this realm of desire and pulled apart by the hands it was made from. People's lives, pulled apart brick by brick. Bael expected to hear weeping, perhaps. Sobs. And yet, all he heard was the howling gale of a storm.

He blinked. A storm? And then, when he paid attention, he saw it.

There were two winds in this world - not, three of them. The first was the kind wind of Alice. The second was the silver wind of Mercury. And the third - the third was the storm. A raging torrent of air howling beside Bael's ears, making it almost impossible to hear. He sharpened his eyesight, looked for where it came from and found-

A boy. A young boy that he remembered. Someone Bael had killed. Driven to death, stalked through the dark, forced to run until he could run no more.

The child was crying. Tears gathered in his eyes even as he *moved*. And he moved. The boy ran, and where he ran, the hands broke. It was an elegant movement, too. He twisted and turned around the people of Stormbraver, gales of horrifying pressure brushing by them, slamming into the skinstalers and the grasping limbs and flattening them.

Bael's calm cracked.

His mouth opened, but no sound left. He reached out, as if to ask. As if to talk. As if to *apologize*, but he could not find the words. There was nothing to say to the living storm, no promise to make, because Bael saw that he, too, was a killer.

Stormbraver. Had Bael made that storm? Had he killed yet more people, indirectly, through the ripple effects of his actions? This crying boy, who now moved to try and save people, carrying those who couldn't run anymore, what had he done before? What had Bael made him do?

Marcel elbowed him in the side. Bael's eyes snapped towards the puny human, who stood so much shorter than him in his demonic form. "What?" the demon growled, feelings leaking through.

The human looked at him for a long moment, then sighed. "I see how it is," Marcel said, and the smile drained from his face, replaced with disillusion. "You're a mopey guy, you know that, Bael? You get all inside your head too much. Charr?" he offered, placing one of them in his own mouth, and quickly lighting it.

A long second passed, and Bael shattered another hundred hands that reached for them in the middle of this battlefield. Marcel took a deep pull of smoke before exhaling it. "You're so scared of who you were you can hardly see who you are," he said.

"You know nothing of me, human," the lord of all demons, Baelzebuth, snarled. "You do not know who I am."

Marcel nodded. "Sure, sure," he said. "I know nothing." Marcel sighed, walking towards someone else who was being injured. He pulled away the grasping, boney hands, as if they were nothing but weeds in a garden, put on his charming smile, and patted the young man on the shoulder with a burst of healing. "Get on up, bud. You got this," he said, warmly.

Then, a moment later, when the guy ran off, he turned to Bael again, letting the friendliness flow away. "Who are you, Bael?" he asked.

The demon growled at him. "I am the ruler of all demons. The bloodmonger of the eternal war, the ruinbringer, the devourer of worlds, the Thing that slaughters. I am-"

"You're upset," Marcel said.

"Yes!" Bael roared. "Yes, I am furious and disgusted. I am horrified by the senseless, perpetual hurt. When even demons could find a solution, an eternal war to fulfill their desires

without impacting others, the sins could not. They disgust me for their hunger, for their draw and pull.”

Marcel smiled. “Looks like I know some stuff after all.”

Bael screamed. There was no conversation to be held with this asinine know-it-all piece of shit. He needed to kill something, to break something, and luckily, this place was good enough for him to shatter. With a furious growl at all the pointlessness of this, Bael surged. A thousand maws opened across his body, and he devoured the hands of Envy that reached for him.

If this was a place of sin then that was *fine*. He would show it sin. Anything to look away from his own.

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Mercury felt anger rising in him. He was tired and exhausted. His mental resources felt spent. And despite that, this shitty fucking place had the audacity to unspool everything.

He'd not noticed before, because of course he hadn't. He didn't see it in the tapestry, and didn't make the connection when the cores of Envy he pulled from the skinstealers tried to infect every thread around them. That Envy was a sinister, crawling thing, that pulled and pulled.

And now, hundreds of people from Stormbraver were in here. Buildings and homes. Heirlooms and gems. Things that had been owned were now stolen, grasped and pulled into the bony ground by a million wanting hands. Covetously, everything was pulled apart.

He hated it. What a disgusting display.

If the sins came after him, that was fine. He could live with this. But this obsession with reaching beyond that, with causing as much harm as possible, it was disgusting. There was no longer a fight to be had here, no longer a slow conquering.

Because someone had already died. A corpse, devoid of warmth or happiness, pulled under the sheet of bone. Consumed. Mercury grit his teeth, and felt the way that <Grief>

threatened to spill from him. The way that the Storm's Raiment flared in anticipation. "Zyl," he asked quietly. "If I get you to its heart, how long until it burns?"

Despite his near-whisper, the dragon heard. "Moments," he replied.

Mercury nodded. And then, he focused. <Lucidity> triggered to wash his tiredness away. The world came into clarity. The first veil shattered then the second, and the third. He saw the tapestry of connection, tainted by the writhing, grasping hands of Envy. He pulled on the fountain of power inside him, drew upon <Grain of Infinity> and liquid fire laced his bones.

Somewhere inside him, a star burnt brightly. It shone with so much light that <Hydration> was working hard to keep him in one piece. Silver flames slowly layered across his skin. He breathed, and then, all at once, he *pulled*.

There was a lurch in the world, and Mercury's perspective split in two. A part of him fell asleep, drawn into the spiralling web of Envy, pulled into its dream, pulled into its stagnant, cruel heart.

Another part of his worked as an interface. His <Dream Manifested>, and Zyl was pulled into it. That was the hardest part, because Zyl was real. He was incredibly real, and so, reducing him down to a dream was difficult, and yet, Mercury pulled. He remembered that he had dreamt of Zyl before, reached out for their connection and yanked until reality blurred and turned.

And when he declared that Zyl was nothing but a dream, it was a lie. He took his own <Truth> and twisted it inside out with <Grain of Infinity>, then spoke a <Lie> that was so convincing, it changed what was real. Zyl, for a moment, became nothing more than a dream.

[<Truth> has levelled up! <Truth lv. 3 -> 4>]

He was pulled under Mercury's silver sun, which just so happened to be manifested in the dream of Envy. Through a connection, Mercury pulled Zyl into that other realm. It was a horrible place of abandoned dreams, a seemingly still lake, with all the rust and corpses deposited beneath it. It was where Envy went to drown its dead desires, the unending depths where ever more want could go.

And it burned.

Zyl's horns glowed and grew, as a faint crown wove into existence above his head. <Seeker of Secrets> whispered its title.

<Rose Crown of Desolation>. Those were the last words Mercury read before he saw that entire realm turn to cinders.