

Chapter 249: Inevitable

Fury poured from the sky like an unending torrent. There was so much of it. This whole realm was an embodiment of wrath, after all. It was never meant to be exhausted in its anger.

And yet.

More and more of that insidious, destructive emotion flowed into Mercury. He felt it roil through him, goad him into anger, coax him to give in to it all, and he resisted. He breathed. And gently let the feelings go.

They drifted down the river in his soul. They entered the lake like rain, and were carried off as sediment. Anger poured off of him like soot from his fur. Mercury breathed, gathered himself, and faced the fallen star of wrath.

His mind was tranquil. Truly, within his heart, he held no hatred towards wrath. All he did have for it was... sadness. A deep well of grief that told him what he saw was a tragedy. A twisted remnant of something that had once been beautiful but was now twisted by this anger.

Ah, how he <grieved> it.

Silver metal flooded from him, amplified by the Stifled Silence. A torrent of quicksilver consumed the spikes, the sharp edges, the fury. Like a hug made of steel, it wrapped around the blades of wrath's champion.

"Shhhh," Mercury hummed quietly. <Grief> wrapped and strangled the monster, wrestling it to the ground, its limbs bending and creaking, then breaking in fury. It cried and roared, feeling no pain and only anger, but the noise was swallowed but the Stifled Silence. The crown of vines demanded peace from the world. "You can rest now."

With a final noise of wrenching brittle steel apart, the star came undone.

The world of fury roiled, irate at the infraction on its anger. Furious at having its wrath subsumed. The sky bubbled like a frothy ocean wave, and then, the stars began to rain down by the dozen.

- - -

The colosseum was slick with red, but at the same time, it was cleaner than it had ever been before. Mercury's path was a wide streak of yellow-white sand, rather than the smeared, dirty orange it was everywhere else. Gladiators swarmed him every step, but pelted by the rain and unable to reinforce this fading dream, they simply fell.

None of these could stand up to his will for even a moment. He was recovering faster than they exhausted him, slaying the lines. The Dream of Starvation fed and grew, to the point where it began crawling alongside the underside of Mercury's neck.

Amusingly, the item seemed to naturally gravitate to his mouth. It wanted to coat his fangs, to rip and tear into flesh, he noticed. Which was kind of funny to think about, since it would make him like a pseudo-vampire.

He could, after all, sustain himself off of only blood, and it would be absorbed by the item, too, letting it grow stronger. A dark-steel vampire, a creature of very literal nightmares. He smirked a bit, and then let the thought go, drifting down the babbling river that streamed through his mind.

Instead, his <Oceanic Consciousness> briefly slowed down time as he leaned into his <Combat Sense>, sidestepping another attack, and <Unravelling> another one of the gladiators, this time a beast wrapped in steel armor.

With <Itinerant> and <Truth> guiding him, it was easy to find his way through the colosseum, even when the direction that was the "center" changed, repeatedly. It was almost meant to be a maze of blood, the center spots reserved for the most baleful, hatred filled combatants, tearing each others' throats out.

Mercury was not that. This world knew that he felt no anger, and constantly tried to, unsuccessfully, infect him with it. And so, he was denied entrance into that inner sanctum - or at least, they attempted to keep him out. Equally unsuccessfully.

"Where is your heart?" Mercury asked the sky.

And the sky <Answered>.

It had no choice.

The sand bubbled and shifted, but the meandering path appeared nonetheless. Wrath struggled against this event. It placed traps, obstacles, bodies in his way, but...

[Level Up!]

At the end of the day, Mercury was very good at <Seeking Secrets>.

Hidden paths were revealed, barriers were broken, and he walked through the sand, carrying a hungry <Rainfall> with him. Droplets of water fell on the sand, washing away decades of blood and decadence. The audience in the stands watched with dissatisfaction. Even when he killed, no blood was spilled, instead being devoured by the Dream of Starvation.

Step by step, Mercury wandered across the sand, the distance vanishing in the wake of his Skills.

[<Itinerant> has levelled up! <Itinerant lv. 6 -> 7>]

Slowly, wrath bent and broke.

There was a knock at the door. That, in and of itself, wasn't too strange, really. Zyl often had visitors. Lucia and him were much closer now, and he was one of a few people Yvette could reasonably try and fail to cut. Plus, if he lost an arm in the whole business, it wouldn't be too hard for him to regenerate. Even if it might make painting troublesome.

No, what was strange was the pull Zyl felt. He'd just eaten, after all, so he shouldn't be hungry, and yet, his stomach growled just a bit. He creased his forehead at the bizarre effect, but went to the door anyway, slowly pulling it open.

In front of him stood a handsome man. He was tall, with sharp ears, but he was not an elf. He may impersonate one, but he did not do so perfectly. His skin was purple-grey, mottled with darker bits, and his eyes like pits of charcoal. A second pair opened on his forehead as he observed the dragon, and the dainty, humanoid mouth began to smile a little too wide, revealing a row of fangs.

"Hello there," Zyl said, when the strange visitor did not speak. The dragon moved a few strands of his hair out of his face, brushing his gloved hands back. "Is there anything I can help you with?"

The not-elf sniffed the air for a few moments, and Zyl felt the anger knot in his stomach. "Yeah," the creature growled, voice deep and smoky, like someone had chewed on charcoal and ash for years. "I need a meal."

Zyl slowly tilted his head. "There are plenty of food stands in central plaza, you can find some there," he said.

"Ah," the not-elf said, mouth splitting even wide, almost reaching his ears. "That won't do at all."

He placed his hand in the doorframe, and Zyl frowned a little. "Are you here to cause trouble?"

"What, me?" the thing asked, smiling brightly. "Not at all." Its eyes glinted at the lie.

Taking a deep breath, Zyl closed his eyes, and a single heartbeat thrummed through his entire being. Fire wirmed through his veins. He huffed through his nose, and his breath steamed in the crisp morning air. "Are we doing this?"

"*Oho*," the intruder said with a smirk. "You're feisty." He moved closer, standing almost nose to nose with Zyl, halfway into the door the dragon was still holding. "If I come in, what are you gonna do about it?"

Zyl smiled brightly, kindly. "I'll have to break a few of your bones, so please bear with me."

Bael took another step forward. "Try me," he said.

"Don't mind if I do, then," Zyl replied. Another heartbeat roared through him, and his hand latched onto the demon's shoulder. Used to the sudden violence, a blade rose from Bael's skin to pierce Zyl's hand, but only ground and sparked against his tough scales.

The dragon simply wrapped his fingers around the sharp extension, straining and reinforcing his muscles as he lifted the demon off the ground. Bael's wide grin turned into an expression of surprise as their feet left the ground. Zyl's heart beat furiously, each thump enough to shake the world.

Wings sprouted from his back, and he stepped forward, out into the light of the sun. His wings grew, and he flapped them once. A dozen Skills triggered to enhance his flight and he darted into the sky. Bael wriggled in his grasp, raking claws across him, tearing bits of tough scales away, but Zyl barely regarded the pain.

He simply soared higher, above the clouds, then darted north, towards a chain of uninhabited mountains. In the blink of an eye, the two were wrapped in whipping winds, staying just under the sound barrier. Bael gritted his teeth, grasping onto one of Zyl's wings and wrenching.

The sudden brutality of the motion tore the limb free from the dragon's back, sending the two tumbling through the air. Zyl suffocated a scream in his throat instead filling his body with incinerating heat. His skin began to glow as he wrapped one hand, then two around the demon's neck, scrambling to stay on top and slam him into the mountain.

Bael headbutted him in the nose, spilling some more of Zyl's blood, then howling as it touched upon their skin. Grey, pallid flesh burnt away under the incinerating heat of dragon's blood. Zyl's heart beat. The gaping hole where his wing was seared shut. Smoke enveloped him.

"I really liked this suit," he growled, angrily.

"Should have had it enchanted with self-repair," Bael complained.

Zyl slammed a fist into the demon's face, sending more cracks through the mortal mask. "It was. You tore those runes."

"Oh," Bael said. "My bad." Then he bit into Zyl's shoulder.

Somehow, even when his claws struggled to find purchase, the fangs instantly splintered the ruby scales covering Zyl's skin. Microscopic protections broke and shattered, and boiling blood, hotter than magma, spilled into Bael's mouth.

The demon's eyes rolled back a little as he feasted. Ah... When had he last truly lost himself to hunger? It remembered now. The vestiges of <Gluttony> that the thing had shaken off, they reawakened at the sight of such a delectable morsel.

But then, a fist slammed into its face. The facsimile, shapeshifted skull cracked and fractured, spilling purple blood, and then, the collision finally came. Zyl slammed Bael into a mountain in one motion so swift and inevitable, the destroyed a few hundred yards of stone entirely.

Teeth were ripped out of flesh, and both combatants roared in pain as their shapeshifted forms broke and splintered.

Bael grinned furiously, a second maw splitting open across the shattered skull, shifting away from the humanoid guise. The demon that had once been the Thing dug itself from the rubble. Half of a mountain had collapsed, but that was *nothing*. The prey was bleeding, the hunt was on, and it was *hungry*.

Zyl, meanwhile, brushed off the dust. He shed a part of his human guise, the tiny, dust-like scales shimmering and growing, enveloping more of him. Ruby-red sprouted from his skin, and he grew taller, his legs digitigrade, claws growing from fingernails. His spark lit up, a fiery sun inside his heart. Zyl breathed, and the air turned to flickering plasma for a moment.

He would not die. Mercury would come home to a hale and hearty house, he would make sure of it.

Even if he needed to burn this demon to ash.

Steel.

Mercury's entire world was a blur of moving metal.

Colossi made entirely from blades, woven sharpness given form, assaulted him. From any angle, in any shape. Some of them are like beasts, others more humanoid, but limbs were simply a suggestion. He found that they could adapt their shape easily after one absorbed another's cutoff arm, made it into a maw, and droze fangs of razor-sharp knives through Mercury's shoulder.

There were, of course, solutions to the problem of having them consume each other to grow and shift.

Mercury could, and did, simply eat them himself. It was helpful for his <Tempered Body>, actually, since the steel was very strong. Of course, he relied on <Babbling Brook> to cleanse it of the mental poison it was laced with - namely turning him angrier - and then needed both <Nutritional Preservation> to help hi digest it, and <Hydration> as well as <Shift> to help him properly adapt it to his body.

But with each bite, his skin grew stronger.

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

Attacks that had carved through him easily began to glance off of him. His insides stopped rupturing after each hit, his organs growing more resilient.

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

Mercury felt the way his own will pushed against the attacks, too. It was almost like his rijñ was encasing his body, holding it together and shielding it. That was probably a side-effect of <Resolution>. He breathed in deep, and let the Stifled Silence expand further.

That was the second trick he had. The <Grief> that he channeled through the wreath of vines around his head swallowed up the metal, consuming it entirely. The silvery crown was hungry for more, consuming the noise, too, slowing each of the attackers down. Blows clashed against waves of steel, the world itself resisting the noise and movement.

It demanded quiet and peace, entirely antithetical to wrath, and so, the two were locked in an eternal battle. And that battle was an aid to Mercury, weakening the hold that anger had on his mind, as well as the creatures he was battling.

In addition... it made his voice mean more, and he hadn't spoken in a while. "Perish," he told one of the fallen stars, a towering abomination the size of a house. The creature of fury writhed, refusing to die at a simple command, and yet, the world moved against it. All that was needed was a push.

Mercury jumped forward, <Biting> the monster's leg, and that was all it took. The titanic warrior folded in on itself like crumpling aluminum foil, furling into a terribly heavy, perfectly smooth sphere that Mercury quickly picked up with the Cloudmatter Shawl. Another incarnation of wrath used the chance to swipe metal across his back, only to be smashed aside by his rijñ.

<Grain of Infinity> flared with resplendent light, fuelling his movement, allowing yet more <Grief> to swallow the world. Silver metal consumed furious abomination, swiping them away in a tidal wave. <Force of the Hecatoncheires> wielded his javelins in an unending storm around him.

Each impact of the bone-spears channelled lightning through the Dracoleather Cloak, charging it up and zapping the incarnations of wrath. And yet, there were just too many of them.

Hundreds of colossi surrounded Mercury. He dealt many, many blows, but at the same time, he could not avoid all of theirs. Even though <Combat Sense> did a lot of heavy lifting.

The Skill had previously gone underused due to massive stamina expenditure, but with <Grain of Infinity>, that was less of an issue. Inside his chest, Mercury felt that infinitely compressed pinprick of energy spew out more and more power through him. Elegantly, he sidestepped yet another blow, letting a second glance off his rijn, then parrying a third with three of his javelins.

Quicksilver rose up into a frozen shield of metal to turn another blow aside, and then he travelled across the landscape of grey with <Itinerant>, space warping around him as he reappeared a hundred steps away.

He <Dashed>, he <Severed>, he <Bit>, he tangled them up in <Thread>, and he hid in his <Veil> to strike from the shadows. Liquid metal in the shape of <Grief> rose up to destroy them, and his understanding of <Metal> as well as <Magical Metallurgy> let him find their weak spots.

Second by second, he was straining his mind to take them down, fighting off the insidious anger, and the dozens of blades flying towards him at any second, letting them glance off him. Wrapped in a delicate dance, he severed another appendage, quickly compressing and swallowing it.

A torrent of rage flooded his being for a moment, only to be carried away on the <Babbling Brook>. Like blood, it dissolved into the water, simply travelling downstream until it was gone. The anger bled away, leaving his mind clear and his skin tougher - though not tough enough to withstand the next blow.

Brutally, a sword slammed into his back, cutting a deep furrow into the Dracoleather Cloak, and carving a bloody chunk out of Mercury. He let the pain slough off him, too, remaining focused and simply dancing out of the way of the next blow as he willed his body back into one piece. Blood stopped spurting, and <Threads> of pure <Resolve> wove from the open wounds.

Silvery, ethereal bands of light sprouted from the wounds, attached to each side, pulled the bleeding flesh back together and then dissipated, leaving his skin whole but for a bit of missing fur. For a moment, Mercury considered getting some form of Skill to turn his body toxic. That could be useful, after all.

Then, he breathed, and simply dove into the fight again. He was fighting a war against anger itself, and it demanded his attention. So, he battled it, dancing across the quicksilver blanketed world one step at a time.

- - -

In the colosseum, Mercury was killing. Life by life, he reaped the bloody tide of this world. His <Rainfall> was unabating, unstoppable. Each raindrop fell through armor, through skin and flesh, through hide and fur. They tore bloody holes into anything they rained on, piercing through any defense.

And then, they hit the sandy ground, taking more blood with them, as they coursed back towards Mercury.

In this world, right now, he was the center of gravity, after all. The eye of the storm. He could just have the rain dissipate, taking all the blood with it, but the Dream of Starvation was hungry, and he did not at all mind feeding it.

So, through the ground, the rain turned towards him, cleansing more of the sand in its passing, and feeding the grey steel of his hungry item. He thinned out just slightly on his back legs, letting the living metal envelop his mouth, turning his fangs even sharper. He did cut himself a little, but after a moment of adjustment, he was able to easily close his mouth again.

Wonderful. Now he could level <Bite> without worrying about getting stabbed in his tongue! Mercury made liberal use of this advantage, <Dashing> at gladiators as the rain pelted them, and tearing into them with his teeth.

Some tiny, animalistic cat-brain part of him delighted in that, even if to his human mind it seemed more like a desperate move. Yet, his jaw was a *lot* stronger than any other muscle on his body, and backed by his points in strength, he could really <Bite>.

With just his normal teeth, he'd eaten nails. Now, after an evolution, his <Tempered Body> Skill, and coating them in the Dream of Starvation? Mercury's fangs handily tore through metal, breaking apart armor and flesh and spilling yet more blood on the grey metal.

This method even seemed to please the colosseum a little. Despite the way that wrath quaked and protested, the way became easier. Mercury had to use less energy on forcing it open. It wanted to see bloodshed, after all, and he was, somewhat, giving that.

Even if the remains of those ancient warriors then dissolved into dream-thread to steady a world that was simply not meant to hold someone like him.

The colosseum was a place meant to grind down one's resolve, to break and tear and carve limb from limb. Yet, to Mercury? He simply kept his leisurely pace, his Skills showing him the way as he carved through.

Blood cleared his way, even as he cleaned it away. There was no hurry. His exhausted mind went to rest, and another of his zeyjn took over, fresh and ready to bring more carnage. He breathed, letting the rain wash the blood from his fur and into the waiting maw of gray steel encasing his body.

Bodies broke, one after another. The world pressed against him as the spectators roared, but failed to keep him away. Insidious poison poured into his mind, and yet failed to take hold. Wrath and violence burned and blurred all around him, but Mercury simply washed it all away.

This world was becoming his, already. Each step, he threaded more of the dreamweave in order to hold him. Each step, more of that ownership turned over to him. Wrath's tenuous hold on its bloody battleground was disappearing, like sand slipping through its fingers.

Mercury breathed. Winds tore across the sands, and the world creaked apart. Mercury could see the connection to the stands, to the ethereal forms of an audience that demanded blood. There were fewer of them now.

He looked at them, seeing threads, tying them all together, to a central point in the sky, like puppets to a star. Then he blinked, and the threads were gone. He breathed. It was the third veil again, so tantalizingly close, yet so far. He wanted to just reach out and grasp it, but he couldn't. When he moved toward it, it slipped away.

So, Mercury simply breathed. He called upon <Itinerant>, taking another step along the path that he was meant to take through the sands. The world bent, his tithe of violence adequate, his tithe of blood entirely unpaid. But it did not matter.

After all, this was starting to be closer to his realm than anything else.

When he finally saw the red star high in the sky, hovering in the horizon, Mercury grinned. Grass was beginning to grow from the desolate sand. The tide of violence slowly stemmed. The horrible fury clawing at his mind slowed.

Wrath was, step by step, suffocating. He looked to the star, feeling anger try to invade through the piercing light, and fall away the moment it touched him. He breathed. Rain fell.

Inevitably.