

Chapter 217: Surgery

Mercury drew in a deep breath. He took a long, still moment to stare at the dead tree. The way the wilting leaves still clung to pale husks of dried bark. He slowly dragged his healthy front leg over the wood he stood on, at the heart of the gigantic corpse. He felt the bumps and grain, the fibers still attached to one another.

The air left his lungs, and he sunk into ihn'ar.

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Orin watched as Mercury acted. The two of them had walked, side by side, into the middle of the husk, past the birds, past the dead leaves, right into what had once been the heart of the tree. They stood, betwixt titanic walls of dead wood.

Slowly, second by second ticked by with them standing there. Orin listened intently, and felt the world, as it all descended into sombre silence. As if the world itself was quieting to listen.

They heard as Mercury drew in a long breath, as his paw glid softly over the ground. Then, it grew even quieter.

Dead leaves stopped rustling in faint winds. The air stood still. The birds outside remained silent.

And Orin felt, at the very core, as a veil was lifted off the world.

It made a shiver run down the length of their back, from the top of their head to the tip of their tail, facsimile fur standing on end. A faint whisper of a <Truth> wormed its way into their mind. The truth was, that the world wasn't so simple. That there was more to see, if one just opened their eyes.

Faintly, like a breathless whisper, Orin saw the world in a sheen of gold that broke.

Everything was different. A world of possibility unravelled itself before them. Suddenly, nothing seemed impossible. They felt as though their mind was reopened to the knowledge that, with enough willpower, they could do anything they set out to do.

Then, it happened again.

Just a fragment, a tiny shrapnel of knowledge slithered its way over to them. A temporary gift of vision, but one that could change their perspective forever. A rainbow sheen, like a film of oil floating on water, fractured too. And they knew that the world was less solid than it seemed.

Reason and reality had just been lifted slightly, and suddenly, Orin knew why the guardians were necessary. Why the Void was to be feared. Another shiver wracked their body. Wonder and fear mixed and flowed into one another.

The experience was nothing short of magical... and horrifying. The leviathans of sheer <Nothingness> were terrifying, yet still, the knowledge that the world was fragile made it malleable. Orin felt their perspective widen. Resonate with it all.

But before thoughts could truly take root, the world itself, too, resonated. And Mercury's gaze slowly trailed downward. Orin followed where the mopaaw was looking, almost as if a puppet on strings - not, that was wrong. They *chose* to look, because they knew, more than anything, that they wanted to see it.

Faintly, in the depths of the earth, there were roots. Wisps of life. Familiarity, and warmth, buried in the faintly frozen soil.

Pinpricks of magic and vitality, hanging around. And beside them, that beacon of strange sensation reached out.

"Come," Mercury said. It was not a command, but an invitation. A declaration of safety, of familiarity. It felt like he was speaking to a distant friend. Someone he shared memories, experiences with, but had not spoken with in a while.

And the warmth rose from the ground, a thin miasma of life moved, stirred, gathered, and arose from there. Thin wisps turned into a fog, which was enveloped in Mercury's <Rainfall>. The fog turned into thickening drops of life, and bit by bit, a figure was constructed.

Each pinprick of life became another building stone of that ethereal body, each one bringing them a little closer to reality. Orin held their breath, not daring to disturb the moment with even a hint of a whisper. They stood perfectly still.

A minute ticked by, and by the end of it, a figure stood before them. Vaguely humanoid, glowing an ethereal, pale green. Vines and bark shrouded the creature, as it stood tall and hunched, like an old giant.

"Why wake a dying one?" it asked, the voice crackling like breaking wood.

Mercury gave a small smile, polite and enchanting. "I was asked to."

"So yer what, a Mercenary?" the figure grumbled.

"Hardly," Mercury brushed it off. "My name is Mercury. Arber is my retainer, I would even call them a friend."

The old spirit waved a hand, its figure splintering and tearing slightly as it did so. "Bah. Humbug. No matter. You already know much of me, and you at least had the courtesy of letting me rise slowly. What do you want? Speak bluntly."

Orin felt a pang of fear at the old one's abrasiveness. Somehow, the avatar of the corpse of the tree seemed remarkably... present. Entirely unlike what they had been told to expect.

Mercury, though, was unbothered. "Fine. I was asked to restore your tree."

At that, the avatar let out a rumbling laugh. “Brababababa! Young ones these days. Think yerself a necromancer? I’m *dying*. Let an old thing like me perish slowly.”

“Why do you wish to die?” the mopaaw asked.

“Why wouldn’t I?” the avatar said with an angry grimace. “It’s all falling apart. Might as well let myself fall apart.”

“Oh, you’re a coward,” Mercury said.

Orin blinked. Surely they hadn’t heard right.

The ancient tree, taken from eternal slumber, stirred. The dead wood creaked with fury. “A coward?” it rumbled.

“What else would you call someone who abandons all hope, just cause things are a little tough?” Mercury asked. Somehow, his voice was still perfectly neutral - entirely unbothered. As if there was no pressure.

And then, Orin realized, there wasn’t.

How strange. The fae realm was so full of it. People’s presences crashing into one another, like a crushing, mountainous weight. Yet, right now, they felt none of that. Was Mercury shouldering it all? Or was the tree simply outputting none, despite the fury.

The avatar moved slowly, its form creaking as it did so, bringing multiple disjointed digits to its head. “Faaaaah,” it sighed. “Coward. Blunt. Bah, you speak well. Brave creature. So tell me, why should I keep living.”

Mercury laughed, too. A soft, quiet thing. “I dunno,” he said. “The point of life is something everyone needs to figure out for themselves. But I can guess, I suppose.”

“Go on,” the avatar directed.

“You wish to die because this realm is decaying. Because you’re tired of holding it all together. But I am putting an end to that.”

The tree gave a somewhat curious expression, if that was at all possible with a blank face. “Are you now?”

“Yearning is no more. It has been made into Appreciation. Its realm, stable. The rulers have signed an accord to treat humans more kindly. They have agreed to let me make them remember their names,” Mercury said.

A simple list of his deeds. A simple <Truth>, and Orin believed it, too.

For a moment, the avatar stood frozen, then gave a low, hollow chuckle. “Brabababa. So, so. You say it’s all on a rise, all getting better. Yet I cannot come back. My story is over. My-”

“No,” Mercury shook his head. “No story is ever ‘over’. You stand here, before me. You are remembered. You are wanted. Mellow’s king itself will give me a favour for restoring you.”

“... The king?” Its voice shook faintly, stunned at the proposal.

Mercury simply nodded. Orin, for the first time, stepped forward. “It’s true. We signed a Promise of Protection, for this work. And a favour, too, was bargained.”

“A favour,” it muttered. Suddenly, it seemed rather pleased with itself. “So, what, I am needed? You will make my life easier? Yet, I stand in decay, how will you restore this?”

Tilting his head slightly, Mercury smiled. “I won’t,” he said simply. “You will. All I am going to do... is find your name.”

“My name? I have none.”

“Did you used to?”

It shook its head. “Never.”

Mercury smiled even brighter. “Then it was about time you got one! Names are nice, you know? Binding of identity. Expressions of the self. You can have one or as many as you like, and you can change them, too. But you deserve a name that makes you happy. Everyone does.”

Alice spoke, for the first time, her presence appearing as if a ghost unveiled itself. “You can trust him, ancient one. He is truthful. Honest, and kind, I’d say.”

“A little selfish,” Mercury added with a wink, “but who isn’t.”

For a long moment, the avatar crafted from dispersing vitality, stalled. It hummed, and thought, mulling it over. The thought was truly curious. Someone so young, yet already friends with the grass and other trees? And now, he promised such grandiose things?

A name.

Was it truly such a big deal? No, not really, not at its heart, but then again... It wanted one. A name for itself. An identity. Who... who wasn’t a little selfish after all?

Dying had been selfish. It hadn’t wanted to pour more effort into maintaining a dead husk of a realm. Now, it could live by itself. Make *real* choices. Break subservience and convenience. Grow... a spine? Hah, what a funny thought.

“Fine then. Fetch me a name, young one.”

“Mercury,” the mopaaw said. “My name is Mercury Starlight Rainfall. You may also call me Yr’enzel, or some other nickname, if you come up with one I do not despise.” The words came with teasing familiarity, which felt strangely homely, both to Orin and the tree.

“Mercury. I see.” A long moment passed, and Orin could have sworn the tree was grinning. “It suits you.”

“As all names should,” he replied, calmly. “Let’s get you one, too, then?”

The tree nodded.

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A shiver ran down Orin's spine again. They felt the aura of Mercury's Skill activating, and by all means, it should have filled them with sinister terror. It was a visual ability, one that was all about gazing to the depths of someone's being.

Yet, there was no fear, because the ability held no shred of malice. It made them feel both vulnerable and yet understood. And they were not even the target.

On the avatar of the tree, a mark took shape. Orin didn't usually see marks, but the <Sympathy> they felt towards Mercury with their own skill, the echo of his abilities they heard through his <Truth>, painted a picture.

It was as though they saw a ghostly paw print weave itself into being on the avatar's blank face. Frankly, the dissonance between the image and the feeling the Skill gave off was almost funny. Orin didn't laugh, of course. They watched.

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Mercury wondered how common a problem it was for fae or generally creatures from the fae realm to forget their names. Cuz like, the broken thrones, the rulers, this tree... Especially for people to whom names are so important. It felt weird.

But, before he let his mind wander too much, he focused on the operation again.

That was what he was doing, effectively. It felt a little like surgery. He was working with a lot of different sensory apparatuses - sensing through shadows, through his <Rainfall>, through his eyesight, his feeling for resonance and marks and imprints, relying on his familiarity, his ihn'ar and expanding his mana to feel with that, too.

Using all these methods available for him, combined with his Skills that allowed for even more variance, his mind was flooded with an incredible amount of information to process, dissect, and analyze. There was, effectively, neverending knowledge streaming his way.

His zeyjn, each of the three versions of him supported by <Oceanic Consciousness>, worked tirelessly to understand it all. Every detail he could glimpse, every bit of knowledge he could gain in order to give an appropriate name.

Slowly, drop by drop, bit by bit, he recognized patterns. Familiarities that resonated with his understanding of himself and the world through ihn'ar. He began to see how the tree thought. A little like a grumpy old thing whose boisterous spirit of adventure was brought down low by the world.

Someone who bent and bent over to acquiesce and was left disappointed with their duty and life. Someone who saw how all their efforts amounted to nothing, how everything they did was eroded away and those whose jobs they were doing remained in their pristine castles, refusing to act.

A person of disillusion.

Who'd seen all the world had to offer, who had wanted the world to be good and been disappointed again and again and again. Over and over. He saw cracks in the tree's vitality where it had already fallen apart. The bits of it that had given up and died and shrivelled to nothingness.

Still, it lived.

Mercury felt, at the very heart of the tree, a desire. There was still a want for the world to change. But there was no more willingness to put in effort first. This one had run itself ragged fighting a pointless battle. Burnt itself out - then done so rather literally, too.

He gave a sad smile. It was an all too familiar feeling. An endless droning of the same, pointless, unfulfilling work to uncaring superiors who ruin every drop of effort you put in? Yes, he could relate to that.

A cold shell built around them so that none of the vicissitudes of time could erode their innards. Walls upon walls upon walls, and yet they still let Mercury see. Still hoped for good, still wanted change, so desperately.

Piece by piece, it all fell into place. Like he was arranging a puzzle, using delicate instruments to fish pieces from a sea of mismatched bits. He reached out with tiny tendrils of intent and magic, taking back bit after bit of knowledge, piecing them together until he had the corners, then the frame, and then filled in the insides of the whole thing.

Was it easy? No. Not at all.

But it seemed like something he was suited for. Something he could do. With bits of will and the trust of the dying avatar, Mercury used his minds like tools. He shifted, moved, cut, and stitched. He wove tiny <Threads> of mana where the tree was fraying. He stitched closed desperation like one might a laceration.

A picture had formed in his mind of what the tree was, right now. He paused.

"And what do you want to be?" he asked, quietly.

There was a pause, as if the avatar held its breath. "Surrounded by life."

Mercury tilted his head. Could he do that? Fracture this creature, spread bits of vitality around... but was that right? He could make offshoots, tiny hosts of it, but that would still be the same creature.

Could he twist the tree into a flower garden? Perhaps. But that would not be the same. "I cannot create other life out of you," he replied regretfully.

The tree simply nodded. "I anticipated it. Then make me stable."

Almost like in his dreamscape, the words came accompanied by images, thoughts, and underlying emotions. Its desire for stability was selfless - it wanted the world to be whole so it could watch other creatures interact.

Like a grandparent seeing their grandchildren play, making sure that the playground was safe. That they did not get splinters or hurt. Could he make this work?

Stability. The ability to create habitats for all kinds of creatures. No more reliance on the fae. Now it was interesting.

Could he make the tree stable? Entirely self sufficient? Being able to enter symbiotic relationships as a choice, rather than needing one with the fae to properly exist at all?

Mellow would not necessarily be happy with this, but he wasn't asked to make them happy. He was asked to restore the tree spirit. And simply dragging them back the same way would not do. Someone who wished to die, who had made that choice, didn't need to be forced back into a dying husk of a body.

"I will try," Mercury promised. "I hope my work will be satisfactory."

"It better be," the tree grumbled.

But with the words, came thoughts. And there was some gratitude. Because, for once, it was granted a choice. So, Mercury set to work again.

Wielding his surgical tools, made from his own mind and his hundred hands of shapeless force, Mercury set about a delicate operation. He looked at the puzzle that he had completed. At the parts he understood. Then he cut. Pieces were reshaped, bits from ones grafted onto others, with again others discarded entirely.

Bit by bit, with every cut, every stitch, every alteration, Mercury felt the vitality shift to assist him. This was a willing choice, compatible with the host's identity, so the vitality supported him. Even those fragmented bits were still incredibly potent, as expected of the core of an ancient tree.

It had lived a long life, and accrued enormous pools of resources. Now, that vitality flooded into the incisions he made, mending the grafts he completed. Rotten pinpricks were cut aside, spiritual bark put aside and dissolving.

Each movement he made was a decision, an ongoing dialogue with the patient. This would make it more resilient to the elements, was that fine? This one would let it imbue growth into the surrounding area. He would need to cut away the part that drew in sustenance from the air, instead changing their roots into an internal well.

Ah, but they needed anchors, didn't they? So, he added roots that functioned more like feelers and digits than nutrient pumps. That way, they could use them to create stability, without requiring anything in turn.

What if someone wished to give them a gift? He made certain types of bark semi-permeable. What if they needed to speak? That one was tricky, but he worked with the tree to find a solution.

And so the hours slipped by. One by one, they passed. The chill outside grew worse, and then it became warmer again, but Mercury didn't mind. He was focused. With <Oceanic Consciousness> he did not need to sleep. With <Nutritional Preservation>, he did not need to eat for many days. <Hydration> and <Prevailing> let them stand and adjust for as long as needed, minimizing physical needs.

In the end, it did not take that long. Only a day and a half.

Eventually, Mercury stopped. He withdrew his minds, and despite the fact that his consciousness was vast and could regenerate as he went along, he still felt run ragged. It had taken an enormous amount of brainpower, and going back over things. Because the tree had changed its mind, or because he realized his previous work had been sloppy.

It was long, grueling work, for both participants, and probably rather uncomfortable for those watching. But by the end, Mercury withdrew. His aura of <Rainfall> wrapped around himself again. The mark left by <Witnessed> faded. Tendrils of shadow and mana faded away into nothingness.

He took a long, deep breath. The tree's avatar had changed. It stood less hunched, now, taller, more proudly, some of that age and weariness having been broken off.

Was it the look of a young creature? No, certainly not. But Mercury had mended many of the scars that came with time, the mental ones, at least, and since physical age was not really a factor... this was the result. It suited them.

"I do not desire to impose more after being granted this favour," it spoke. "But if you would, have you found a name for me?"

Mercury smiled, faintly, as he laid down on the ground, feeling drained. His mana was practically empty, and frankly, he was exhausted. But he had thought of this. "Sibori," Mercury said. "That's what I'd name you. Take it, if you like."

The avatar cracked a smile. "Yes. I think I will."

With a ping, the name was registered, and as it did so, it anchored itself into their being. Then, with a single heartbeat, the world trembled faintly. As if a tiny hole had opened up. The dead wood crumbled to ash, falling towards this hold like drawn in by a vortex.

Torrents of mana whipped through the air and into Sibori, as a faint, green crystal began taking shape in xir heart.

"Ah, Orin. You may want to take a step back," Mercury advised politely.

The fae, though, remained standing. Mercury saw it in their face, their openly worn expression. They wanted to see this. They almost needed to. And so, that was fine, Mercury would let them.

Even as the ground dissolved underneath them, he built platforms with his rijn. One for himself, one for Orin, while Alice remained floating by himself, and his third zeyjn was able to sleep and recharge.

All he had to do now, was watch his handiwork take shape.

The snow and leaves were whipped up into a frenzy. Dead branches and wood disintegrated and absorbed. Reshaped in midair, flowing into the patterns and puzzle pieces Mercury had made.

He watched, and when the process took a while, he briefly checked his notifications.

[Acquired the Skill <Medicine Iv. 2> through a specific action!]

Seems like the system, at least, agreed that mental health was health. Well, then again, this whole change would also make Sibori much more physically healthy. Less reliant.

Mercury had, after all, somehow managed to use their incredible reserves of vitality to create what was effectively an entirely internal, self sufficient reactor to produce more. That was where all the material was going - kickstarting that reactor.

That's where the sound was coming from, too. All from that small core, still growing from shards of crystal green, weaving itself into the shape it was meant to be.

A heart.

Wasn't that a little funny? Mercury had given heart to someone who was disheartened with the world. He smirked slightly, watching the thing beat slowly for the first time, watching the crystal green essence take root in the avatar's being.

Then it beat again. And again.

Waves of green flowed through Sibori's body. Then, as the heartbeat stabilized, the crystals stopped growing, the waves of green spread, then reached an outer barrier that was distinct, yet malleable.

Hints of that vitality, though, permeated that shell. Bits of life flowed outwards, crystallizing, building into tiny flecks of bark. It was rather dark, a rich ebony with streaks of almost star-like sparkles interspersed.

It grew, outwards, into a shell that was even less human than before. Limbs and branching grafted roots poked out from different points among the body. Its head was a perfectly smooth blank slate of ebony wood. Mercury gave a small smile, even as Orin dropped to their knees, gasping for breath as the waves of mana finally stopped rolling over them like a tsunami.

"Comfortable?" he asked.

"Quite," Sibori replied, xir voice calm and steady. "This form suits my purpose."

Xe paused, then took a deep breath. “I **thank you.**”

Now, another wave passed over the world, and Mercury knew, instantly, that it was special. A covenant. A promise.

The leaves, those that remained, stirred into a storm. Multiplied, until the smell of autumn rolled in with brutal power, against Mercury’s <Rainfall>. He frowned.

“Oberon,” he greeted with a nod as the faerie king with the mask stepped out from the storm. With him came weight, authority, and crushing pressure that slammed into Mercury’s exhausted form. But he held firm. He <Prevailed>. Because he would never break, and that was the <Truth>.

“Mercury,” the king spoke, tone regal. “You bargained a favour from me, to be requested upon completion. You now bargain a debt from my servant. Request your favour from me now, before I see that *gratitude* as an insult.”

No breaks yet, then. Mercury took a deep breath. Then, he faced the faerie king.