

## Chapter 199: Proving Oneself

With a ring of a bell, the school year began. Mercury found himself in a classroom, surrounded by desks. They fit poorly, and the chairs were uncomfortable. His friend, the one he was meant to ground, sat next to another kid. A loudmouth, class-clown gossip.

Mercury's head felt sluggish, barely able to follow the lecture - actually, there was no lecture, he distantly noted. Then, that detail was discarded again. It mattered very little how well this fake world was built, all he needed to do was make sure that his friend remained unchanged.

Despite the weight that pressed on his mind, Mercury set upon the task. He had fragmented memories, pieces that didn't feel quite right, but he had to put them together. The picture he had of this friend was, supposedly, clear.

They were kind, upright, hardworking, but also a bit of a pushover. A scaredy cat, and ever so desperate for approval. They would change whenever someone requested it of them, malleable like clay, and unstable like a castle of sand.

That picture was ingrained in Mercury's mind, but if he held onto it, the trial would fail. His friend was, in essence, a creature of *belief*. It was what one expected it to be. They had no shape or species of any kind, but they still had desire. Something they wanted to be.

What *did* his friend want to be?

Mercury's slow mind struggled to complete the picture of that. He had the pieces, but they felt slippery, and he constantly had to renew his grip on them. It was like trying to walk on an ice skating floor.

Regardless, Mercury bit it down. He wrapped his significant will over those pieces, holding them in place, grasping the details in his mind simultaneously. He couldn't have called it easy - the harder he tried to grip them, the more slippery those details seemed to get - but he completed the task.

The ringing of a bell shook him out of it.

His sand-like friend, who he decided to dub Clay for now, had changed. They were just a little more... mean. In that way where gossips whispered and giggled to each other, in that way where you never knew if they were talking about you. It... wasn't at all suitable for the Clay in Mercury's puzzle.

With a lurch and a bit of dizziness, he found himself in the next part of the trial. Clay was in sports class. They were among the last picked for basketball. They were slow, their sand-self providing poor footing, but they couldn't change that. Afterwards, they cried, and were mocked for it.

Again, the trial shifted, with Mercury's mind barely able to keep up. He grit his teeth. He had to *want* this, he knew that, so he set about it with more desire. Clay deserved to be who they wanted to be, rather than some twisted amalgamations of desire imposed on them by others.

Mercury *wanted* that freedom for them, so he set about it again. What did Clay want? Were they strong, tall, short, thin? Would they want to be charismatic or wise or good at studying? He knew they wanted recognition, but for *what*?

He asked.

When the vision shifted again, he walked up to Clay like some kind of ghost, and simply asked. "Hey Clay?"

"O-oh! Mercury! I didn't see you, uhm, hi there. How are you?" they asked back, flinching for a moment.

Mercury looked at his fake-friend for a long moment. "Have you ever... thought about what kind of person you want to be?" he asked.

Clay froze, the shy smile on their face becoming nervous. "... What?"

"You know. If you could be anything, what would you wanna be? Would you wanna be sporty, or smart, or charismatic? Good with animals, maybe? Determined, hard-working, kind, graceful..."

They backed up a little from him. "W-where did that come from?"

Mercury smiled, in what he hoped was a calming manner. "You know, just cuz I'm curious. I think I wanna be free, you know? Independent. I wanna be able to make my own choices, and try to give those choices to others. I also wanna be kind, as far as that's possible." The words had slipped out from his slow mind before he could consider them, but they seemed to put Clay more at ease.

"O-oh," they stammered, their sand-body shifting slightly. "Well... I suppose if I could pick, I'd wanna be... reliable. Happy with myself, and have the determination to tackle any problem that comes up!" they said.

Slowly, Mercury nodded. "I see, yeah, that's just like you."

Clay reached a hand to the back of their head. "Is it?"

"Yeah," Mercury smiled. "I think I get you now, Clay. Thanks."

The trial shifted once more, the incessant ringing of a bell starting the next period. Mercury's sluggish mind worked, wrapping around pieces of what he knew about his friend. He knew they were kind, open, outgoing, they wanted to make friends and talk about themselves, but they lacked the confidence. His view of them was... clear.

Mercury added a bit of pride in there, not enough to become arrogant, but to at least see their own good qualities, and held onto it. Desperately.

Instantly, he felt waves crash against that fragment of self-confidence. The teacher was yelling at them for a job poorly done. Mercury felt that clash with his image of Clay, saw that teacher try to break them down. What a miserable display.

Gritting his teeth, Mercury strained as hard as he could. Clay wanted to be relied on. That meant they must know they were good at some things. Maybe that wasn't in this class, with this teacher, or maybe it was a momentary failure, but it didn't detract from their value as a person.

A flash of light and a lurch, then the trial had shifted again. Clay was being gossiped about, people giggling about them. Their insufficiencies. It was insidious. Were they good enough?

Again, Mercury found himself tested, now by dozens of cruel thoughts. Clay was beginning to bend, to crumble in the face of adversity, but Mercury did not let it happen. He believed in them. He convinced himself, held on with an iron will. He felt the strain on his mind, internal and external. He felt a headache coming on, but he held onto it regardless.

Instantly, the trial shifted again. Clay was being pushed around. Mocked to their face. Mercury held on.

One after another, memories buzzed by. They each slammed into him with the force of a speeding car, but he simply grit his teeth.

[<Training Weights> has levelled up! <Training Weight lv. 1 -> 2>]

The notification buzzed by his ears, and he felt his mind growing slower, but he held on regardless. This was bullshit. Letting go now would betray a friend.

Suddenly, it didn't matter if this world was fake, or whether Clay really existed. Even figments of a test did not deserve this kind of treatment. Mercury lost all care, all thoughts. He fought, wholeheartedly, for them.

When they were tempted into being cruel, he held onto their kindness. When they were tempted into giving up, he held onto their determination. Bit by bit, challenge by challenge, rather than having the puzzle pieces fall away, Mercury stuck them together.

Rather than tearing Clay apart, Mercury began to assemble them with each moment that passed, each vision that flashed by.

And they were flashing, now. Each trial happened in moments. They stacked up, dozens, thousands of thoughts crashing into Mercury's iron will. They battered him, threatened to shake his belief, and toss him aside like a bug in a tornado.

It was him against a torrent, raging waves of spite and fury and hatred trying to shake his foundation. But Mercury simply let it all wash away. He didn't clash with those thoughts, didn't seek to break them apart - they didn't matter.

He knew what Clay wanted. He knew what they were. This was simply a crucible for them, but they had wished to end up a certain way. Maybe that wish was a little childish, but that didn't matter. Wanting to be determined, wanting to like oneself... what was wrong with that?

So, he held onto it furiously, even when the vision sped up, even as he was washed aside even further, into a raging storm of white. The flashes of light were so constant and so bright, vision after vision coming, that he closed his eyes, and held on.

Until, slowly, the storm grew weaker.

Clay succeeded.

Mercury's belief began to stick.

Notifications from the system whizzed by, but he disregarded them. His mind felt slow. Clumsy. Powerless. But it was his mind, and it would do exactly as he wanted, so it held onto that image of their friend. Rather than a powerless thing, always falling apart, they were reliable.

So the storm abated. Because once they were reliable, they were no longer shaken by those thoughts. Mercury didn't have to resist as much for them anymore. It was a virtuous cycle.

Finally, after a hundred more flashes of light, the visions abated. There was no more belief to be tested, because Mercury knew what he thought was objective truth - Clay had, after all, convinced themselves and everyone else, too, of it.

They'd changed their chosen name. They went by Flint now. Mercury smiled.

It suited them.

"Thanks," Flint said. "For believing in me."

"No prob," Mercury answered.

The trial faded. And a whole host of notifications slammed into Mercury.

[<Training Weights> has levelled up! <Training Weights lv. 2 -> 3>]

[<Witnessed> has levelled up! <Witnessed lv. 4 -> 5>]

[<Vast Mind> has levelled up! <Vast Mind lv. 8 -> 9>]

[Your Willpower has increased by 8!]

[You have acquired the Title <Relentless Will> through a specific action.]

[<Relentless Will>: This Title was granted to the individual upon maintaining confidence in the face of overwhelming odds. Despite disadvantages, the individual stubbornly enforces their will on the world. Provides bonuses to Willpower, minor affinity increases to Willpower related Skills, and reinforces the individual's mind further.]

[Side Quest: "Faerie Trial" completed. Reward: 1000 Skill points.]

It took Mercury a moment to readjust to the space he was in. The faerie court. He had gotten too used to the flashing visions, but luckily, <Adaptable> quickly let him get used to it.

Mercury breathed the stale, mossy air, calming his racing mind and heart. He had proven to them what he was about.

No one said a word. There was no announcement from queen Titania, or king Oberon. The entire hall met him with dead silence. Every ruler fixed their eyes on him, but none dared to protest what he'd shown.

Gracefully, Mercury gave a curtsy, bending his legs lightly while keeping his eyes on the rulers. Then he stepped back into the crowd of those not associated with any court. No one complained.

Since Mercury's steps were near silent, the first sound to split the air in the hall was that of wood cracking. King Oberon's yellow eyes were blazing with fury. He had gripped his throne of gnarled wood and yellowing leaves hard enough to crack it. Despite it, he was not staring at Mercury, but straight ahead.

Queen Titania met his gaze, though. The purple of her eyes seemed bright enough to sear holes into the air. No words were exchanged, until eventually, the faerie king leaned back. The queen paused, briefly, then turned her gaze downwards. "May the next courtless one step forward."

An unassuming faerie.

"Two of the courts have staked their claim. Decide on a trial, rulers."

The day went on.

One after another, the courtless failed. Young fae fell, weak fae fell, unassuming fae fell, and talented fae fell as well. The only salvation to pass trial was hardened willpower. And so many failed.

Mercury thought the trials weren't meant as tests - they were meant to be torturous. Alice's trial wasn't difficult. She didn't need to prove anything, all she had to do was suffer. Arber, on the other hand, needed to go through a whole new life. Two decades of loneliness. Of challenges.

And for what? It proved nothing. Mercury's trials, at least, showed he could solve problems and maintain his beliefs. But even then, those felt like they had been made to mock him. The trials weren't meant to pick the worthy, they were meant to break down people's mentalities.

He hated them.

One by one, the rulers tortured the fae, then put them through conversions. Some accepted them, some struggled and fought, all ended the same. It was disgusting.

Then it was over.

After the trials were done, the rulers, one after another, vanished again. Most took away the new members of their courts. Dust came away with only a single addition, while Blossom took no one. Every other court had at least two more faeries among their numbers.

Finally, once the rulers were done, the day was dealt with, too. Mercury was, finally, allowed to leave without breaking hospitality. The amount of glances he got was astounding, though. Misha smiled at him with a twinkle in his eyes, while lady Whisperblossom started hungrily instead. The heir of shadow seemed fearful, and Odvyse seemed impressed.

Ignoring them all, Mercury headed back towards his room with Asher, Arber, and Alice. They didn't talk at all until they were out of the hall, and even then they walked in silence until the loudest complaints from the hall faded into dull, thick silence.

Asher broke it first. "Mercury, what was that?"

The mopaaw looked back at his fiery friend, and sighed. "I don't know. Somehow, the twelve courts aren't all faerie courts, it seems. And the others also wanted a piece of me."

"Yes, I can tell that much. But that doesn't matter. You were outstanding! How did you pass two trials? How did you never bend?" he asked again, wildly gesturing with his arms.

Something about the innocent nature of that question made Mercury smile. Asher didn't care about the implications, or the courts or the rulers that much. He just saw his friend succeed and was excited about it. It was a thin smile, but it was, without a doubt, there.

"I appreciate the vote of confidence," he said.

Asher gestured again, and would have probably been grinning ear to ear if it weren't for his lack of facial features. The swirling colours under his skins were moving faster, though. "Seriously. You showed the rulers, of all people! They're millenia old! They made people hundreds of years old kneel... how old are you, Mercury?"

"Must be... Thirty-eight now? Maybe Thirty-nine?" he said. He hadn't really been keeping track of it rigorously at all.

At that, even Arber stopped. "Not even... a century?"

Asher's jaw would have dropped if it could. "Oh... wow. What- what did you go through for that?"

Mercury looked at them, giving a somewhat sad grimace. He glanced at Alice. "A good chunk of suffering," he said. "But mainly, personal growth. I like to think I've become a better person; not because I suffered, mind you. But because I'm keeping on."

The heroine gave a knowing, sad smile at that. "Yeah. Our suffering doesn't dictate us. You're right."

Arber tensed up at that, too. It felt like they were letting out a shaky breath. "Aye. Ain't that the truth."

There was a brief silence, until Asher scratched the back of their head. "I feel like I'm missing something."

"It's the trials," Mercury provided. "They're not meant to make you grow. They're meant to make you suffer."

"Huh," Asher hummed. "I... never saw that."

"You wouldn't," Arber waved them off. "They hide it. Sneakily. They dismantle your value systematically, so no matter whether you succeed or not, you emerge worse for the wear."

"Oh," Asher said, somewhat downcast. Then, they added, "... Yeah. That... sounds like the courts alright."

"Yep," Mercury said with a sigh. "That's the courts."

Alice just nodded. She still seemed distraught. With <Force of the Hecatoncheires>, he reached out and squeezed her hand. For a moment, she flinched slightly, then settled down, and smiled appreciatively.

They went to their own rooms, and to bed, without talking a lot more. Mercury shut off all three of his ystirs, and finally rested.

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Once morning came around, Mercury felt a little more whole. The constant, dull pain he had felt on his mind had faded quite a bit more.

But the fact that he had no dreams made the rage boil inside him again. He was starting to get really quite sick of the farce that was Hospitality. In fact, he rather strongly suspected that the fae would break it before he was gone.

Some of them had. Clearly, the empty thrones cared nothing for it at all. The rulers, too, could probably shrug off whatever adverse effects there were from breaking hospitality. Not fully, of course, but they would live

If they wanted him gone, he'd be annihilated.

That, too, made Mercury feel angry. But it paled in comparison to how furious he was at the harm caused to old Uunrahzil. That... was where the fae had committed a grave crime. Honestly, there were so many problems.

The amount of people he had seen harmed, or in positions they were not voluntarily in over these last days was, frankly, disgusting. Servants, gladiators, test takers, even the *fæ themselves*. What a fucked up little world they had made, what a fucked up game they were playing.

He hated that. He hated the suffering and the pain and the propagation of misery. But that wasn't personal.

It did make him wanna tear it all down, of course. But then, they had harmed old Uunrahzil. That was personal. They were his mentor, and one of the first people to show kindness. Did they have an agenda, a desire behind it? Probably. But who didn't?

Mercury refused to let them stop existing. He held them in their mind, remembering them furiously. That fae, the broken throne... They'd pay for what they did.

That thought was angry, it was violent, but it was also necessary. Clearly, negotiation had already proven impossible. Instead, rather than something where he could peacefully change things, he would need to carve out that future himself.

But not yet. He was a patient mopaaw after all. He'd wait. He'd hold onto his image of old Dreamweaver. He'd show the fae *exactly* what he was all about. That was what he had done in his trials, and what he would do again. Tough as it was, he would never, ever, break for them.

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Arber picked him up from his room, as they always did.

"Any info on the eighth day?" Mercury asked, as Alice and Asher joined them.

Arber nodded. "Yeah. Today is a day of exploration with low stakes. The rulers will be keeping watch over the nearby areas, so you may go out there, as far as you'd like. It's a bit of a treasure hunt."

That sounded fun. "What's the catch?" Mercury asked.

"They keep away outside threats. Participants are allowed to hurt and steal from one another," Alice provided helpfully. "Anyone outside a specific area is considered a participant. You'll see it."

Yep, there it was. "You know, by now you'd really think I'd be used to the constant barrage of fighting the fae encourage. Yet, somehow, they continue to surprise me."

"It gets worse," Asher said. "Not participating is seen as poor manners. As in, breaking Hospitality."

"Staggering just how many cruel rules these rulers can come up with," Mercury said with a sigh.

Fine, then. He'd participate in their bloodthirsty treasure hunt. Let's see what kinda rewards he could dredge up.