

Chapter 225: Shower

Another day passed with Mercury in the court of Rust. He saw more of it, and the strange ways it worked.

The biters were, in essence, the tiniest pieces of rust. Both the beginning and the end in this place. They swarmed any construct, causing it to decay, building sheets of living, deathly red on top of rotten metal. They coated the water and the air and the ground.

But they were also born and died. Thick, red fruits of metal grew on Nether. The ancient tree was capable of growing iron, thick capsules of it, that served to create more of the biters. They would then fall, split open, and release the red little plague. And whatever metal the biters consumed would also turn to more of them.

"Where do they all go?" Mercury asked.

Millions of tiny fragments of red whirled everywhere in the court, but he truly wondered where they ended up. An ever growing amount of them would simply overwhelm the ocean at some point. Especially since even more of them spawned from the natural rust that the elements caused.

Rust's ruler simply looked at him and gave a shrug of shrieking metal. "They stagnate, I imagine," it said. "Perish."

Nether gave the ruler a long look, then the faceless avatar turned to Mercury. The wooden gears within it whirled again, and they pulled out a clipboard. "This unit has recordings of many biters skinking to become part of sedimentary rock formations upon natural expiry. Some reach places of extreme heat - bordering the court of Scorch - where the metal is molten down and generally rejoins the flow of liquid slag underground. Some additional processes also occur, however their contributions are not particularly notable."

Gingerly, the avatar placed the clipboard aside again. Orin glanced between them and the ruler of Rust. No one spoke a word. "This designated unit hopes this information proves itself helpful," Nether eventually broke the silence.

Mercury looked at the ruler of Rust. If a robot could show an expression, it would have been a mixture between displeasure and surprise. "Your information is deemed more than acceptable, Nether," he said, smiling.

The avatar gave a bow at that. "This unit expresses satisfaction."

"So," Mercury said to Rust. "There are two changes. First, your court. Rust. It must develop an ability to cycle. Nether has named some. You were unaware of them. This is a failure."

Unable to refute, the construct just nodded.

“And you. Your personal mode of operation is too different from your court. That incongruence made you forget your name. Ciarski of Shadow sunk into alignment too much. You suffer from dissonance. You spare all thought to yourself and none to your court,” Mercury said.

His words were harsh but ultimately true. The ruler of Rust still seemed unhappy. The titanic hunk of rusted metal looked at Mercury.

“So you will tear those inefficiencies out of me, then.” The construct said it as if it were a fact.

Mercury tilted his head. “Do you wish for me to simply ignore them?”

The ruler of Rust gave him a look. The metal of its construction creaked, and it moved its hand over its face in a rather human motion of frustration. “No,” it said. “But I do not wish to cease being myself, either. My identity is strong.”

“Yet you are nameless,” Mercury said. “Aimless.”

“If only finding oneself were easy,” the ruler of Rust huffed.

“Now that is something I can agree with,” Mercury smiled. “But things aren’t easy. Decisions are tough sometimes. I will give you a name if you want one. Otherwise... I do not know. Perhaps Titania will make another step up as ruler in your place.”

“Rust is mine,” the construct said. “Mine and mine alone. It is part of me as I am part of it.”

“A decaying court’s rusty heart. How fitting,” the mopaaw returned. “So then. I will be here. Think. Return to me once you have an answer.”

Mercury stood up from his place in the guest room. He shook himself faintly. His fur had changed under the effects of <Hydration> as he’d sat. It was not far more resistant to the rust and biters that had dealt slight damage on his way to the room. None of them would be able to even damage a hair of his anymore.

He turned to Nether. “Where will we be staying?”

Once more, the avatar bowed. Then, they raised a hand, and the red wood rumbled. Instantly, walls rose across the room, segmenting the large hall into smaller ones. A few breaths passed with the rolling and creaking of growing wood. When it was done, Nether gestured at a few newly erected rooms in the back of the guest hall. “Your residence has been constructed. This unit wishes you a pleasant stay.”

Walking up to the rooms, Mercury found that the doors to them were styled as submarine hatches, just like the entrance to the guest hall was. The walls were decorated in wooden gears and pipes, some of which spun and whirred. He was unsure if there was actually something moving through them or if they were simply there for aesthetics.

With a quick use of his ghost hands, Mercury twisted open the door, and it opened with a creak and a faint hissing sound. The quarters inside were styled like a boat, too. There was even a hammock, rather than a bed - woven from long leaves like palm fronds.

The ruler called after him for a moment. "Mercury-"

"No," the mopaaw interrupted. "*Think*. We'll talk later." Before there was another reply, Mercury closed the wooden hatch, turning the lock on it until it was firmly sealed. Then he hopped into the hammock, feeling it sway faintly beneath him.

There was a bull's eye window in the wall, showing a sea of red waves passing over red sand outside.

Rust was strange to him. Foreign, in a way. He understood the very edges of it. A fuzzy understanding of principles that didn't quite fit together. Rust as a process and as an end goal and as a cycle all had to coexist, and right now, there was a failure with the court on multiple of those parts.

It was rather strange. Mercury could tell he wouldn't gain a new piece of understanding for it. At best, the knowledge would end up ingrained into <Rainfall>. That ability carried a rather significant erosion effect, after all.

Wet iron rusted after, of course. So, <Rainfall> could cause <Rust>. He shook his head, smiling a little. All of that was just matters of perspective. Some people could probably do that equation the other way around, too, if they understood it properly.

Mercury had gotten pretty good at expanding his own perspective. That was why he kept picking up new perception type abilities after all, but none of them were truly perfect. There was, simply put, no way to see everything.

Frankly, by now, he was sure that such a feat was entirely impossible for everyone and anyone. He believed this world had gods - based on the evolution options for <Astral Body> - but he didn't think even they could see everything.

Because that "celestial" perspective had a notion of what was good and what was evil. There was a perspective inbuilt into it, one that wasn't necessarily correct. Insofar as that a perspective could be wrong or right.

Well. Perspectives could be wrong, Mercury thought. At least, to him, a cruel perspective wasn't necessarily a correct one. And a perspective that lacked nuance.

Wide, sweeping judgments and wide, sweeping cruelty. It was funny how suitable <Rainfall> was for both of those; yet wielded by him? He couldn't really use it that way. Anything he didn't know, anything he hadn't judged thoroughly, the rain would just slide off.

But anything that deserved to rot? It might as well <Rust>.

He smiled, feeling his ability shift faintly within him. It wasn't enough to advance his understanding of it, not truly. It was a tiny extra incorporation, a piece of a piece. <Erosion> was part of <Rainfall>, and <Rust> was part of <Erosion>, maybe? That wasn't quite right, of course - his ihn'ar abilities hardly worked in chains as simple as those. But it was accurate enough.

A small summary for why it was integrated, yet not deemed important enough to advance his understanding.

Mercury's grasp on <Rust> was also paltry. That certainly contributed to the lack of a notification. But it existed, to some degree. Thousands of biters floated by his window every second. Microscopic fae that would tear into anything they could. Rusting it.

Looking away from the window, Mercury turned his gaze upwards, to the rounded roof of his submarine-style cabin. One of his zeyjn kept the hammock swinging slightly. He thought, for a long while. As he usually did. And, of course, he practiced.

Making iron nails in the court of Rust was a practical joke, and the humor wasn't lost on Mercury. He spent the practice smirking to himself.

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After a day, there was a knock on Mercury's hatch. He looked over at it, and twisted it open using <Force of the Hecatoncheires>.

Orin stood beyond that threshold.

Mercury tilted his head faintly. He had expected the ruler of rust. Even Alice, frankly. Orin surprised him. The fae had followed him on his journey, but they had always been relatively quiet. Watching, rather than judging.

In fact, most of the time, they seemed kind of scared. Mercury thought that was a little funny, really. Orin had a signature Skill - as most people did - and it had to do with producing clones. Well, something like that, at least. It felt more like they were existing in multiple places at once, developing slightly differently.

Regardless, it was a Skill that made the notion of death almost laughable. But, of course, that didn't make it any less frightening.

Opening the door further, Mercury gave the fae a nod. "Come in," he said.

Orin did as asked, closing the door behind themselves. Their body was well suited to such a human task. They had two arms and two legs, even if they were made of orange gelatin, filled with moving leaves, and shaped into dog-like features. A few more moments passed. Mercury waited.

The fae stood in front of the door, just looking at the mopaaw.

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Orin was... nervous.

Walking into this encounter had already taken much of their courage. They weren't brave, and in fact, many of the feats of the creature before them made them nervous.

If Mercury so chose, he could probably use his set of Skills to unmake them entirely - <Superposition> or not.

Of course, there was no reason to be afraid of that. The mopaaw was perhaps the most easygoing creature the fae had had the pleasure of interacting with, yet. He took offense at very little, except a few bits.

And Orin had learned those. He didn't touch the mopaaw without permission, didn't intrude on his space, didn't speak to him derisively. And that was all.

Compared to some of the other rules they'd learnt for playing the games of the courts, it was laughably simple. Not even a challenge. Even in the event that they made a mistake, there was no need to worry, really. The mopaaw was likely to pardon them.

Of course, Orin hadn't made a mistake. They'd been quiet, observant. Doing their duty and reporting back to Oberon whenever it was demanded on them. Not that the faerie king needed the reports. He was perfectly capable of observing it all by himself. But, of course, having someone there increased accuracy.

That wasn't why Orin had approached, though. It was-

"Please," Mercury interrupted their train of thought. "Take a seat."

Stiffly, Orin stepped forward. They'd been standing still, staring for too long. Were they shaking? Like a leaf in the wind. Pathetic.

The fae took a deep, steadying breath. The motion was so horridly human, so ordinary, and it was one they had entirely copied from the creature in front of them. The creature that they admired and feared and were fascinated with all at once.

"You've come to visit," Mercury noted calmly.

Those deep, piercing eyes were fixed on Orin. The fae wondered what he saw in them. His gaze went deeper than their skin, that was for sure. Did he see their nature? Their very being laid bare? They knew, for a fact, that he could.

Mercury had, in front of their eyes, unravelled both a ruler and an ancient one.

It had been a terrifying display of power. Something truly special, a Skill that not anyone else in the fae realm had shown. He had simply come, swept them all up... as if coming for a spring cleaning. In a few pages, the courts changed more than they had in arcs. Centuries.

And they would change more. Orin could feel that much. It wasn't a strict feeling, not a perfect one. But they *knew* things were not going to remain static. Something would change. Something had to change.

In fact, they found it miraculous that both Rust and Shadow- *Ciarski* of Shadow, now, had agreed to undergo Mercury's modification. Orin didn't think all the rulers would, though. There would be pushback, almost certainly. And when it happened...

"You don't talk much, do you?" the mopaaw commented with a smile.

Orin snapped out of their train of thought, looking at him. Their voice felt hoarse as they spoke. "Ah... I suppose not," they said.

Why did it feel so awkward? They usually had no trouble, even with beings more powerful than them. Orin had even spoken to Oberon before. They might just be an ordinary member of Mellow, but they were not necessarily a coward.

Mercury, in front of them, tilted his head. "You're one of the more human fae, you know?"

"... Huh?" Was that a compliment? An insult?

The mopaaw continued calmly. "You're nervous. Thinking. Anxious. A thousand thoughts running through your head. You gathered your courage to come here, and now you can hardly express why you even did so," he said, instantly laying Orin's feelings bare.

Nervously, the fae fiddled with their makeshift fur. Mercury was not yet done. "I think," he said, "you're terrified but resolute. I think you are unhappy with yourself. I think you dislike having to make reports to the faerie king. I think..."

He trailed off, quietly. Then he smiled. "No," Mercury said. "I shouldn't guess at that. Tell me, Orin. What do you want of me?"

There was another long silence, but this time, the mopaaw didn't seem keen on interrupting it. Orin sat there, balling their fists like some kind of petulant child. They could barely summon up the will to speak their mind.

Why? Were they so afraid? What exactly was their fear? Repercussions? The faerie king? Orin gritted their teeth. So many other versions of themselves were out there. Dozens of themselves, and each one found themselves frozen, overwhelmed.

It was too much. Just-

A soft sigh reached their ears. Mercury's soft sigh. "Orin. You have accompanied me for pages, now. Please. Speak your mind."

Fine, then. They would. "I want out," Orin said.

The words didn't slam into the world. They weren't powerful, didn't play into any rules in particular, not in the way that so much fae magic usually does. But they broke a dam within Orin themselves. "I want out," they repeated.

"Out?" Mercury asked.

"Yeah," Orin said, still grinding their teeth. "Out. Out of this court. Out from under Oberon's thumb. Just... out. Be done with all of this. The pointless rules, the posturing, the threats and schemes and deceptions. Out."

Mercury took a deep breath, and then he gave a soft chuckle. Orin flinched. “What?” they asked.

“Oh, I-” he paused, his breath hitching. That had almost been an apology. It would have incurred a debt, but luckily, he stopped. “I meant nothing by it. Just crossed my mind as amusing that someone with the head of a dog would seek to find a place where they could find honesty. Loyalty is a trait closely ascribed to dogs, where I come from.”

Orin blinked. That... was all? Somehow, they felt like they should have expected it, but the fact that there was no mockery in his tone was still surprising to them. “I... see,” they said.

“So. You want out. What does this entail for me?” Mercury asked.

At that, Orin froze again, slightly. There were a few avenues to this. Some more appropriate, some less. All they had to do was pick a path; a decision they had already agonized over for a while. Breathing out, Orin spoke. “I wish to be your friend.”

That declaration did have an effect on the world. A faint one, nothing like when it was invoked by rulers or ancient ones or more powerful fae. But a faint ripple nonetheless. Mercury looked at them. “Is that all?”

Now came the more difficult part. The one that Oberon would truly get mad at them for. The one that risked their entire existence. “I would join your court, if you’ll have me.”

At that, Mercury seemed genuinely surprised. “My court?” he asked. “I don’t have one.”

Orin looked at him. Their eyes met, and Orin felt no fear. They had gathered all their courage and it burnt throughout them. Already, they’d wagered their life. Nothing could make it worse. “You will,” they said. “Well. You might not. But I think that after it all, given your fame... it might manifest itself.”

The mopaaw gave a hum in reply. And then an amused huff. “I could stop it from forming.”

“Probably,” Orin nodded. “Will you?”

Mercury tilted his head. “Maybe. I think I’ll have to see. Depends on how things go, I suppose. Wouldn’t one of the current courts have to fall for me to establish one.”

“No,” Orin shook their head. “Not necessarily at all. The courts are arranged in an intricate network and in groups, but by no means have they always been. The balance is shifting already, one more variable might increase the chaos, but by no means will it be an overwhelming change.”

“Interesting,” the mopaaw nodded. Then he smiled. “Well. Consider us friends, then.”

When he spoke it, the word slammed in the air with more weight. Orin felt a tiny, faint and frail connection form. Strange. They had expected it to be more of a chain. That was how it was often wielded by the fae. But this... it felt more like a blanket? How peculiar.

“You’re smiling,” Mercury said.

"I suppose I am," Orin nodded. They were. "I suppose Oberon will be displeased with this."

"He might," Mercury agreed calmly. "And he's entitled to, really. You said you wanted to leave his court, after all. I imagine this is not looked kindly upon."

Orin shook their head. "It's not. The ceremony will not take place for a while."

"You're lucky I don't care that much, then," Mercury smiled.

There was a storm brewing in the room. A smell of faint decay, of cold winds and wet leaves. But then it died down.

It smelled of old iron and of sea salt and of blooming flowers and of dark skies. It smelled of rain.

"Get up," Mercury said, and Orin did so, stepping close to the mopaaw.

The two looked at each other. "You're sure of this?" Mercury asked.

Orin nodded. "Yes."

The wind in the room picked it. It grew to a storm, rushing through Mercury's fur. His tail drifted through the air lazily despite the commotion. Orin felt it too, but they closed their eyes. "Yes," they confirmed again.

"It might sting a little. It shouldn't, though," Mercury said, smiling.

And a drop of rain hit the fae's face.

Softly, it soaked into their fur. It was faintly warm, entirely unlike the cold winds. More raindrops followed. Each one felt like a tiny gift to Orin. Seconds passed, and the storm intensified, the rain beating down so hard Orin hardly felt the cold anymore at all.

They were soaked through. Their fur was entirely coated in water, and beyond all the supernatural sensations, Orin smelled the surprisingly ordinary odor of... wet dog.

It made them laugh. And what a strange experience that was. To laugh.

One by one, other manifestations of Orin, each made with <Superposition>, were also soaked through. How the rain reached them in other ends of the fae realm, they didn't understand. It didn't matter though.

Something began to wash off the fae. In thick rivulets, it sloughed off. Slow as molasses, but speeding up.

The raindrops were cruel to that *something*. They punched into it, leaving craters and dents where that influence hissed and sputtered. Carved into the dirty coating, peeling it aside layer by layer.

It was freeing. Orin breathed, smelled the rain, and smiled. They found that the fear was gone. The decision felt good to have made. Right, even.

Mellow was washed away.

Mercury carved the season of autumn, of Mellow, out of Orin's nature. The fae was awake for it all. It felt almost gentle, like a warm shower after a cold day. An hour passed, and the smell of rain eclipsed the roar of the wind.

Outside the room, Orin still heard it. The way that colourful leaves raged. The way that Oberon wanted what should have been his, but what no longer was. And Orin found that they didn't care, really. They didn't need to.

The smell of slow decay was stripped away from them. When the rain finally stopped, they opened their eyes. At their feet, there was a puddle. Of orange and brown dirt, dried leaves, broken twigs stripped bare. It was Mellow, washed away, slowly dissolving into a puddle of rainwater.

Orin looked at it. Then they laughed again. They looked at their own hands. Had they changed? Were they different?

They were. Their fur was no longer as translucent. Instead of ghostly orange, it was a solid beige. No more swirling leaves inside them. Instead, there were now faint clouds gathered at their shoulders, rolling down their back like a cloak.

It was part of them. The cloak smelled like rain. Orin was... pleased at that, they found. It seemed rather close to the court of Skye, but it felt very different. Less ephemeral, and it wasn't made of cloudmatter of lightning. Instead, the clouds felt heavy, with a faint strength to them. Some kind of unyielding quality.

And then, the floor fell towards them.

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Mercury caught Orin before they hit the ground. "Nether, can I get another hammock?" he requested. Instantly, the wall shifted, growing one more place to lay down, which Mercury promptly placed Orin on.

He took a deep breath.

That had been *exhausting*. Washing away the influence of a court like that... And, of course, Oberon was fucking *pissed*.

Despite that, Mercury regarded Orin. The fae had been cleaned, their fur a softer shade. The clouds covered their back, and they seemed pleased with that. Mercury could still faintly see their insides through their skin, of course, though now those manifested more as faintly moving streaks on their skin. As if rain was falling just beneath it.

How bizarre. Mercury had not created a court yet. But he could still tell that some of his influence had certainly stuck around with Orin. Was that because of him? He was definitely able to change others without pieces of him sticking around. Ciarski and Sibori were entirely free of that, after all.

But here, Orin was, having retained some of those qualities. Were they simply better suited? Did they *want* to retain them?

His thoughts were interrupted by a thunderous slam against the door. The wood splintered and cracked. Another slam sent the door buckling. Mercury frowned faintly.

At the third slam, the door broke open, shards of wood raining down on Mercury. The stench slammed into him immediately, barely kept at bay by <Rainfall>.

Oberon stepped into the room with all the force of a typhoon. "I want my envoy back."

"You will not touch my friend."