

Chapter 204: Home Sweet Home

Zyl's heart beat loud enough to shake the world they found themselves in. The ground quaked a little every time it pumped blood. Comparing it to an engine wouldn't even do it justice - it felt more like it caused tiny earthquakes with each beat.

Titania didn't exactly look scared, Mercury noted, but she did look annoyed. Conflicted, and angry, at the thrones, but also at this new intervention. "Guardian Friaminth, I did not know you were planning on visiting the fae realm," she said, chewing a lip.

Things seemed to slow down, but Mercury wasn't fooled. The calm was a tin facade before carnage ensued. Zyl growled, a low rumble that reverberated through the failing threads of this realm, making them fray further. "So it would seem. Answer my question, faerie queen."

"Now, now, surely-"

"That one," Mercury replied instead. He nodded towards broken Joy's iridescent eye.

"Visitor, we do not appreciate your meddling," Titania hissed through gritted teeth.

Mercury turned to look at her. He was bruised and battered, fur stained with blood - he was still bleeding from his eyes, too. Anger simmer beneath his skin, but he breathed, and calmed it a little. There was something strange about this. "You don't want joy dead," Mercury noted.

Titania grimaced. "I do. The decay of the realm is tragic."

"Sure, but that's about the realm. Your duty," he said, looking at the eye again. It and the strange collection of shapes, Joy and Truth, simply hovered there, as if waiting, weighing their options. "Oh," Mercury said. "Oh I see."

"You see what?" Titania said, gritting her teeth in indignity. Zyl moved to cover Mercury slightly more - not that he needed to move much, given his full dragon size.

Mercury stared down the faerie queen, voice booming with power, terribly heavy presence and all. Even when it felt like his bones were about to turn to dust from the pressure, he faced her down, calmly. "The thrones, or Joy, at least, was your friend once."

The queen scoffed. "What?"

"It's why you can't kill them. Because you remember them. This isn't the ruler of Joy up there. It is a broken husk, puppeteered by the memories of any who knew them when they lived," Mercury said.

"Ridiculous," Titania scoffed again.

Zyl's eyes turned darker. "If it is not the case, *kill it*."

The queen turned at him, eyes blazing with anger. "What?!"

"Kill it," the dragon said, unbothered. "They broke Hospitality. Deliver the toward punishment. Mercury is under the courts' protection, is he not?"

"They are part of the courts," Titania stated dryly.

"If it were any of the living courts, you would jump at the opportunity to get rid of them," Mercury noted dryly. "Not now, though."

Titania slammed out a fist, cracking the very sky. Joy's patterns of rainbow light broke against the fissures in the air. "My patience wears thin," she hissed. "No one dies today."

Unfortunately for her, there had been a miscalculation. As she slammed out her hand, the fraying threads of this world, already strained by the power they had to hold, finally gave out.

One too many of the delicate things holding this realm together was broken. Rather than simply exercising her power, Titania had cracked open a gate to <Nothingness>. Instantly, the threads began unravelling. Fraying, even some tearing was fine, but all of that decay meant that a single proper hole caused the true collapse of the entire place.

So, the weave of this world began to fall apart. And there was one place they would fall towards - the nearest nexus.

Within moments, the void devoured the world. Creatures beyond what Mercury conceived entered through the cracks, which then consumed the sky. Rather than a world with gaps, it became a void with thin strips of reality in it.

Mercury soon couldn't see what was happening anymore, though. Less than a heartbeat had passed, and the weight of the world was pressing down on him.

This... was entirely different from anything he had experienced before. Standing before the rulers who demanded fealty had made him defiant, but this was nothing like that. Mercury crumpled, within a moment.

His body was crushed, his legs giving in. He fell to whatever passed as the floor, heavily enough to break a rib. He spat blood. <Rainfall> roared to protect him, but against the weight of a whole world, it was powerless.

Mercury triggered <Oceanic Consciousness> and his minds bega to race. What could he do? He was still maintaining ihn'ar, seeing the threads of reality crash into him, warp around him. Everywhere he looked, his world was awash with burning colours, searing into his sight.

Everything slowed down, but it was hard to tell if anything at all changed. The situation was the same, his minds were heating up. It hurt, but he bore with it for now. He tried reaching out to the threads, but it was like trying to catch a fly out of the air. They were too small, and moving too fast. That, combined with their bending, twisting and turning, it was impossible to simply grasp them.

He needed something better, something more powerful. The creatures from the forest - who he was sure were among the threads somewhere - had called him an anchor. The threads were collapsing towards him. Not any of the vastly more powerful creatures.

Why was that? He wasn't more real than them, he knew that much. Zyl and the rulers... all of them were so densely wrapped in reality it was almost incredible. But Mercury had something special, something none of them had.

For the first time, he properly triggered <Dream Manifestation>.

In half a breath, his mana plummeted. The Skill drew incredibly on his reserves, tiring him out in moments, as reality warped. But he didn't manifest all, and there was hardly any resistance. After all, there wasn't exactly anything he needed to replace; there was only a vast emptiness all around.

His inner world took hold with ease. Grass grew to cover the floor. The sky slowly filled in with patches of pink and purple. A radiant, if battered, silver sun hung in the sky. And next to it... another, more distant star. The nexus.

When it wove into being, the threads changed direction. The storm around Mercury was finally left to its own devices. He no longer carried the weight of the world. It was... almost quiet. Only a bit of rain falling around him.

Meanwhile, up in the sky, thousands of threads crashed into the nexus. There were notifications, but he did not look at them for now. It was unimportant. Mercury found it hard to think, suddenly.

The effect of <Oceanic Consciousness> had ended. His ystirs were burnt out. His bones were broken, and he was covered in blood. His whole vision was tinted crimson from the bleeding. His eardrums had ruptured somewhere along the way, enveloping his whole world in dull silence.

He felt his leg throb. The stump had been aggravated from the pressure, the wound opening and dark blood flowing out from there, too. He felt his Skills and vitality working to stitch him back together, but they sure were taking their time. Maybe he could just... rest his eyes a little...

Then, a white flash and the feeling of heat filled his world.

Roaring fire.

It was a storm of incandescent flame that descended. His world was manifested, and it was the only hold in the void, so the people around him held onto it. Zyl had the easiest time, appearing beside him on the grass. His face was determined, then fell as he saw Mercury.

Then it twisted into anger.

The dragon shielded Mercury with his whole body as Joy came into this realm. The giant eye appeared in the patchwork sky, rainbow light snaking through it and clinging onto there. Even through the red-white of the flames, Mercury could still clearly see Joy.

Queen Titania arrived with the smell of flowers, appealing to one of the sensory organs Mercury had not lost yet, he noted with mild amusement. He could hardly even muster the energy to feel anything, really. But that was fine, for now.

Whisperstar flitted across the sky.

They were alive. Mercury smiled. He raised his front paw upwards. "Come here, little friend," he said.

The words were quiet, somewhere between a rasp and a whisper, but it didn't matter. They reached Whisperstar all the same. And, instantly, they fell from the sky. A tiny orb of starlight, piercing through the deluge of powers and threads. Whisperstar arrived next to Mercury.

"All safe," the mopaaw said with a faint smile. It wasn't a lie. He truly felt safe, then. Truth had not come into his dream. The broken throne had decided to leave. A thin stalemate between Joy and Zyl was maintained by Titania. No other rulers were coming to help her, yet.

Mercury placed his paw over Whisperstar, pulling them into the embrace of the cool grass. "All safe," he repeated, like a mantra. "All safe."

He looked at the sky, flashes of blinding light shining down. Everything was on fire, yet simultaneously not. Mercury let out a long sigh. He was so sick of it. He wanted Joy to just leave already. Hell, they could even have most of their world back if they wanted. Mercury would remake it himself if he needed to.

... Actually...

In his delirious state, that didn't seem like too bad an idea, did it? He didn't need to rebuild the whole thing by himself. There were dozens of fae believing in its existence, influencing the weave of reality, pushing the threads slightly into place. Maybe, with just a bit of guidance...

Mercury reached out to his nexus and took a single thread from it. They were compact now, slowly being absorbed, but swiping a singular one from the surface wasn't too difficult. Then, he wove a second thread into the first. It felt almost easy.

A third followed, then a fourth, and so on the pattern went. Under a sky of fire Mercury began weaving.

[Your understanding of <Dreamweave> has increased! <Breath (lowest) -> (low)>]

And weaving away.

There were dozens of things working to make it go his way. The fact that there were fae who believed in the broken thrones, for one. Many powerful fae, especially. The fact that the world had been there, even made from these threads, and it was more about returning them to how they'd been.

He was in the right place, at the right time, right after things had gone badly. And he, himself, was so delirious, he couldn't think of how impossible the task should be, and instead simply did it. With all the might of his ystirs he would have stood no chance, but now? It felt easy.

One by one, he plucked away the threads, and then, eventually, like a magnet, more of them flew out themselves. His nexus had devoured hundreds of the threads already, shimmering with rainbow colours, but Mercury didn't mind. He didn't need to recreate the world perfectly, there was no point in that.

Instead, he wove it to be a little nicer. The colours a bit less bright, the sky a little less vibrant. Not enough to be dull, but just enough to be easier on the eyes. Taking off the hard edges, or something.

Did he need to justify changing the world of Joy, actually? It was broken before, and he was doing them a favour by repairing it, really. Mercury laughed a dry, raspy laugh. It was entirely humorless. He didn't expect any thanks, but he also didn't want to face any consequences.

Actually, fuck it, he'd be fine. He changed the world of joy a bit more, to just be nicer. More hospitable and less extreme. No more eye-searing, no more spores, no more joy at the cost of another's suffering.

Then it all clicked into place. With the main weave set up, more and more threads flew towards it. The world rebuilt itself, and Mercury slowly let his manifestation fade, only plugging in the gaps that remained. There weren't enough threads to make a complete world left, but he'd done his best, so it was quite okay.

It was patchy, and ugly at points, and he was sure space and time would be messy at best. This world wouldn't connect to others easily, or develop quickly, and getting it filled with mana at all would be a task and a half, but it was something. A cracked bucket was still better than none at all.

The fire in the sky stopped coming. Zyl and Titania flew down. The eye of Joy still hung up there.

"Mercury," the faerie queen started, "have you done this?"

He couldn't place her tone. There were layers upon layers in it that he didn't care to try and decode. "Yeah, sure," he said groggily, his tongue feeling heavily. "Guess so."

"That is... unbelievable," she said.

Zyl looked at her. "I really think you should believe it. Or do you know anyone who could have done this?"

She simply stood, stunned to silence.

Mercury looked between the two, then settled on his boyfriend. "Zyyyyl. Can we go home now?"

"No, Mercury, wait," Titania said, but the dragon shot her a glare.

He turned to Mercury, then smiled softly. "Tell you what. I'll take you wherever you'd like to go, yeah?"

Titania stared at them. "I want to make a deal," she said.

Mercury waved her off. "No deal. Nope. Nuh-uh. Not fixing your stupid realm for you. That's way too big. Go pester someone else."

"We have people to teach you weaving-"

"Your people harmed my teacher," Mercury hissed, the sleep once more kept at bay by his anger. "I come here at your whims, as something just shy of entertainment. Under 'protection'. I have my dreams invaded, nearly die multiple times, and you wish to cut a deal? *No.*"

The faerie queen simply stared at him, seemingly dumbfounded.

Mercury was not particularly powerful. Heck, there were even other people who could weave out there, but he doubted it was quite the same. Did they know of ihn'ar? Did they have a nexus? Did they daydream?

It didn't matter.

"Let's go home?" Zyl asked.

"Yeah, we should," Mercury nodded. His vision was going bleary from tiredness.

Then, a purple wave appeared in the air, and an old lady stepped forth from it. Daryl. "Ah," she said, looking around. "It appears I am too late. Please, excuse my tardiness. If you would grant me one moment?"

Zyl looked to Mercury for an answer. "Sure," he said.

"Right," Daryl nodded. "I believe I will find the throne soon. Will you be fighting it?"

Mercury blinked, then barked out another dry laugh. "Yeah, once I'm healed up."

She nodded, giving a bow. "I will do my best to wait. Perhaps I can negotiate with... this one," she said, pointing at the eye in the sky, "to get my love back. Would you allow me to brazenly request your feat as a bargaining chip?"

Ah, his feat. He didn't particularly care. It was, by all means, a brazen and greedy request, but the woman had been decent to him. "Sure, bargain with it. If you trade too much of the credit, though, I do expect compensation."

Daryl bowed. "Of course. I would not disrespect you as such. You have proven many times over that you deserve face, brave one."

"Are we leaving now?" Zyl asked again.

Mercury looked around. There were... a lot of untied threads in the fae realm, he thought. This was most likely not his last visit. They were so volatile, too. Everyone here had a rather intense personality.

He sighed lightly. "Yeah. Let's head out."

Zyl reached out with a claw, and Mercury watched. The dragon did not know what weaving was, but he did not need to know. There was no great finesse to the technique, he wasn't bending or weaving or anything. He simply ripped into space.

"How do you know where to go?" Mercury asked.

"Hm? Ah, it's rather simple. I just imagine myself facing the right way, and then pull hard enough," he said with a smile.

The claw was coated in blazing fire, burning hot enough that Mercury saw space itself melt around it. Zyl was performing something that was, quite frankly, ridiculous. Rather than technique, the dragon simply burned through space until it felt about right, and with a heavy helping of visualization, he dragged them back to their house.

Right into it, actually.

Somehow, as improbable as it should have been, Zyl was accurate. They landed right in their living room. Mercury frowned slightly. "I'm bleeding all over the furniture," he noted.

Zyl laughed. He was back to being a human, running a gloved hand through his scarlet hair. "Sasasa! Seriously? That's what you're worried about?" he asked.

Mercury grumbled slightly. "... Well I would also like some food."

The dragon stared at him, and Mercury held his gaze, eyes blurry and all. Zyl shook his head after a few seconds. "Alright, dummy. Sit down. We'll clean things up later. I'll make you something."

"Thanky, Zyl," Mercury said.

"Of course."

"No, I, uh, I mean it. Thank you. For rescuing me," Mercury said.

Zyl gently shook his head. "You would've lived."

"I dunno about that."

The dragon looked at Mercury. For a long, silent moment, he just looked. "You would've lived," he said, again. "Promise me you would've."

"What...?"

“Mercury,” Zyl said. “I’ve known you for a bit now. Not too long, but long enough. I have seen you pull off the most unlikely stunts. I need to believe you would’ve lived. Maybe your soft, fluffy fur would’ve been incinerated, but you would have stuck around, right?”

With the way Zyl looked at him, Mercury took a moment to answer. He took a deep breath. Would he have lived?

There had been a notification. His body wasn’t entirely necessary for his survival anymore. He could live without it. Would he have escaped the thrones, though? Would Titania have protected him properly for long enough. He bit his lips.

“Maybe?”

Zyl gave a sad smile. “That’s the best I can hope for, then? A maybe?”

“Sorry.”

The dragon shook his head. “Don’t be. It’s... okay. I trust you a lot, Mercury. I don’t want to lose you.”

“Me neither,” Mercury answered. “I don’t want to lose you.”

Zyl nodded, walking up to Mercury and hugging him. It stained his clothes a little red, but the dragon didn’t seem to care. “You’re home. You’re safe.”

“I am.”

“I’ll make you food now, yeah?” Zyl said.

“I’d love that,” Mercury said, his eyes moist.

“I love you, Mercury.”

“Love you too, Zyl.”