

Chapter 179: Iridescence

As quite often before, Mercury found himself waking up in a bed. It was in a familiar wooden room, in his house.

And wasn't that quite a thought! He had a house now. All it took for him to be able to actually own real estate was... being transported into a whole other world, huh.

That sunk in properly, too. He was in another world, he'd killed monsters, he'd learnt magic he'd-

Oh. That must be the effect of the chains breaking, then.

Mercury closed his eyes and took a deep breath, centering himself. He felt <Still Mirror>, reached for the Skill, and activated it. His emotions slowly dissipated, like snow on a summer day. He felt the air brush up against his fur, and it felt solid.

Then he opened his eyes again. The world was unbelievably bright. Far, far more so than it had any right to. There was rainbow iridescence covering most surfaces in the house, and he could... see glowing outlines? *Through the walls?*

Oh. Crap. One of them was walking towards him. Was that an alien or something? Why the fuck was it glowing-

Zyl walked into the room.

It... was just Zyl. His skin seemed shiny, now. It had been pale white before, striking in comparison to his flame-red hair, yet now it *shone*. In fact, he seemed to be radiating light all over.

"Why are you glowing, Zyl?" Mercury asked.

The dragon blinked at him, slowly. Silence hung heavy in the air for a long time. "Sorry?" Zyl asked, confused.

Mercury paused, double checking to make sure what he was seeing, but he was definitely right. There was *light* coming off of Zyl. Not like ephemeral, ghostly light, either. It was warm and orange and yellow and red, like a candleflame in the night. And then, he realized he could feel it, too.

Tiny motes of... flame? Maybe? Flicked off of Zyl, landing on Mercury's fur, and he felt warm. Comfortable, and cozy. They drove away the shadows in the corner of the room, falling to the floor, sending gentle glows underneath the bed and the bedside table, eating away at the darkness hiding in corners.

Mercury giggled. "You're glowiiiiing!" he said, his speech slurring slightly.

Zyl shook his head. His shoulders fell, and he didn't stand as tall anymore. The dragon took a seat on the side of the bed, and let out a sigh. "Haaaah. Mercury. I'm not glowing."

"That's what someone who's glowing would say!" the mopaaw protested.

"You know, I'm trying really hard to be a bit upset with you. I had a whole speech prepared about how you need to be more careful," Zyl said, weakly turning to look at his boyfriend.

Mercury gave the dragon a cheeky smile. "Gosh, guess I'm just too breathtaking to chide, glowy boy~"

Taking a deep breath, Zyl shook his head again. "Sure. Yep, that must be it. Dingus."

"Love ya, Zyl," Mercury said, suddenly genuine.

The dragon froze up. His frown slowly turned into a smile, and he reached out with a hand, laying it onto Mercury's side. "Love ya too, dingus."

With a smile on his face, Mercury fell asleep once more.

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The sun drifted over the sky lazily. It set, and then rose again. Dark indigo and violet was replaced by morning pink as the sun rose, until all of the firmament was, eventually, stained blue.

Mercury's eyes fluttered open again.

What a nice word that was, he thought. Fluttered. Like a butterfly. For a moment, Mercury imagined butterflies landing on his eyelids and giggled at the thought.

He was warm, tucked into a blanket. There were flimmers of embers on the wooden floor, but they didn't burn. It was like a little trail Zyl left, letting Mercury know he was there.

With small motions, the mopaaw looked around. The world was bright and colourful, yet somehow bleary... He blinked the sleep out of his eyes and things became a little more clear.

A smile formed on his face when he saw the gentle, warm glow of Zyl through the wall. His lovely, lovely boyfriend. Who always looked so damn perfect, and was so scared of being vulnerable sometimes. Mercury was getting to him, he knew that, slowly but surely. The whole dragon escapade had helped with that, regardless of how dangerous it was.

For a few moments, Mercury thought of Berthorn and Nir and the rest of Zyl's family, and wondered where they were, now. Had Trinyakorie finally learned a little bit of humility? Probably not, that would be kinda unreasonable to expect from her, wasn't it.

But his mind was soon again focused on the presence, when it finally clicked that he was *not* just seeing Zyl through the walls, there were two whole other people in the house.

Well. "In" the house might be giving them a bit too much credit. Zyl and one other person were truly inside, and one more person was at the door.

Mercury focused a little more, and the indistinct glows he saw through the walls became a little clearer.

Then he had a fit of giggling. People were really in his walls, now! What were they doin' in there? Jamming out with the rats? He laughed some more at his own joke, though calling it a joke was really doing him a favour.

Ah, right, the people in his walls. They surely warranted a closer look?

Once again, as he actually tried to see, the glows became a lot clearer. One of them pulled itself together into a tight shape. A steely, refined tone of grey, with many long streaks of white. Old scars, hurts that never quite healed, and shaped a person into who they were, for better or for worse.

Yasashiku. Mercury was certain. It looked like he was staring at steel pressed into a person, though it was steel without an edge. There was no desire to hurt in there.

The other glow was more difficult to place. It was... blue-ish, though largely clear, with swirls and eddies at the edges. It flowed, constantly, and sounded like he was near a rushing river. It was also smaller, shaped into something four-legged- oh! Ruvah, of course!

For a moment, Mercury was weirded out by the fact that he only realized the general shape he was looking at *after* the colours and patterns in it. Wasn't that quite strange! It was a little hard to make out the glows through the thick wooden walls, because the walls themselves shone with rainbow colours.

He giggled again. Now his whole house looked like gay flags. Take that, parents!!

Elated, he flopped back on his bed. If it was just Ruvah and Yasashiku, he felt fine about it. There were dozens of glows walking by his house, but he didn't pay any mind to those. They were just people on the streets, indistinct blurs rushing by. He could have looked closer, but without doing so, he didn't even get the general colour. Just the knowledge of something there.

Gently, Mercury laid on his bed, staring at the ceiling. Patterns swirled across it, like when he laid in the bathtub without moving, and the water went calmer but not too calm, and started painting wavy lights onto the walls.

The sight was pretty, and for a few seconds, Mercury lost himself in it.

Oh! His wandering mind suddenly focused on something, again. Zyl and Yasashiku had absolutely no idea who Ruvah even was! He should probably introduce them!

Suddenly energized, Mercury hopped out of bed, promptly collapsing. Hah! How strange! His legs didn't seem to work as they usually would.

Giggling, Mercury toyed around, flailing his legs in the air. It felt so soft, like he was touching a thousand cushions, and made him smile some more. He was so distracted, in fact, he didn't even notice one of the glows rushing upwards, until Zyl rapidly opened the door to the room.

"Heeeeey Zyl~" Mercury greeted the panicked dragon, snickering some more.

In the brief moment between coming in and being spoken too, Zyl was already scanning the room, but then his gaze landed on Mercury on the floor, legs still flailing in the air. "Mercury! Are you okay?"

"I'm soooo fineeee. Almost as fine as you, hehe," Mercury said, then giggled some more.

Zyl sighed a little, then asked. "Focus, please. What are you doing on the floor?"

"I was jus' try'n' get up!"

Gently, Zyl put his hands underneath Mercury. They felt wonderfully warm to the cat, and he was bathed in the firelight glow Zyl emitted. Suddenly, everything felt alright and warm.

"I need you to be more careful, Mercury," Zyl chided.

"Mhmmmm..." Mercury hummed, already half asleep.

"Please. Focus. I need you to talk to me," Zyl pleaded.

Suddenly, the warm glow felt a little more energizing rather than comforting. Mercury's eyes opened. "Okay. Okay. You have my attention, 'kay?"

Zyl smiled, a small motion. "Thank you. I'll try to be quick. Ruvah is here to meet you."

"Right! Ruvah! That's why I left bed! Yeah, we're friends. From the uh... the uh..." his words failed him, as Mercury was unable to come up with the Big Words required to describe something as complex as the blood eclipse.

"Okay." Zyl nodded, twice. "Do you wanna meet them?"

Mercury nodded. "Mhm!"

"You gotta promise to focus, though."

"Kaaaay."

As he made the promise, Mercury did feel his mind coming back under his control a little more. The world grew a little sharper, more in focus, though no less bright. If he looked too long, it would've been enough to cause a headache.

"Alright, let's say hello to them," Zyl said, moving out the room.

"I can walk by m'self," Mercury grumbled.

Zyl gave him a chiding look. "Really? We need to have this discussion?"

"Lemme walk."

"No, Mercury, please just--"

"Lemme walk!" Mercury said. He felt that sting of panic again, that dislike of being babied, of needing to be his own person, he wanted out, he needed to be alone, to not be touched, he--

"Fine. Okay, fine," Zyl said, breathing deeply and putting Mercury onto the floor.

For a second, the world seemed wholly too big, then it spun, and Mercury felt himself tip over to the side, almost collapsing. But, he refused. With an effort of will, and an exertion of some of his Skills, he pulled the world back into scale, and himself into the *present moment*.

The dream-state collapsed in on itself, and suddenly Mercury was himself, in his own body, and things clicked, properly. He saw things as they were. He felt... like himself. Maybe more in sync with his skin.

There was still iridescence coming from everywhere. There were glowing people in his walls. Heck, Zyl was still glowing! But. At the very least, it felt real again, finally.

He shook himself, like a sudden shiver. "Okay. I'm back," he said.

Zyl eyes him suspiciously- no, that was worry, Mercury rapidly corrected. Zyl eyed him *worriedly*. "You... okay?"

"It's complicated, I think, but yes. I'm alright, Zyl," Mercury said, giving a faint smile. "I think I did something quite stupid. I have... a couple boxes in the edge of my vision. Appy'll show them to me when the time's right, but I have an old friend to meet right now."

"That's the most coherent thing you've said in days," Zyl said, allowing himself a faint smile. "Okay. Let's go."

"Just one thing," Mercury said, stopping Zyl right as he was about to start walking again. "How long did I sleep?"

"About three days, total. You were really out of it. Kept muttering in your sleep. Sometimes you were awake, briefly, but you went back and forth between being hyper aware of everything, and in your own world entirely."

"Right. Okay. I can manage this," Mercury said, shaking himself one more time, as he felt the blood running through his own body. Pins and needles he hadn't even known were there slowly dissipated. "I think I'm good now. Let's go."

The mopaaw led the way.

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Ruvah was downstairs, still at the door. Yasashiku was silently eyeing him. Mercury knew it was "him" with a single glance, though maybe <Water> was some help there.

A smile crept onto the watery blob's face. "Mercury!" he said, happily. Actually said, too, not in the way where Mercury was the only one to understand him.

"Ruvah! You're talking!" Mercury said.

"I am!" Ruvah nodded, eagerly. "I speak the strange noises two leggers always make at me!"

Mercury laughed. "How?" he asked.

"Well, when I found someone with many of the Skillstones for <Language>, I used one. Then I understood what "price" means, and was able to pay," he said, looking smug.

Well, so long as no one was hurt and he paid for the stone, that seemed like a fine outcome, honestly? "Well, I'm very glad you got there. Let me introduce you, then! This right here is my lovely boyfriend Zyl, and my smithing teacher, Yasashiku!"

The surface of Ruvah rippled once while facing Zyl, then a second time as he turned towards Yasashiku. To Mercury, it felt a little like a small bow. "It is nice to meet you."

"I hope they didn't give you too much trouble for wanting to meet me?" Mercury asked.

Ruvah smiled. "No, no," he said. "Nothing unusual."

"We were just telling him to wait until you were awake again. Then you woke up," Yasashiku supplied. "Please don't fall unconscious in a puddle of blood again when you're smithing, Mercury-kun. It is not good for my heart." There was no humor in his voice.

Slightly, Mercury nodded. "Yeah. I'll, uh, try. Sorry about that, Yasashiku."

"It's fine," the old man said, arms crossed. It wasn't fine.

"Uhm, anyway! Why don't you come in for now, Ruvah. We can get you a bit more settled?" Mercury said.

Not needing to be told twice, the sentient blob of water gracefully accepted the invitation.

Soon, Yasashiku and Zyl were seated at the kitchen table, with Mercury and Ruvah standing on the chairs instead of sitting. "So, Ruvah! What have you been up to?" Mercury asked.

"Hmmm," the water hummed, slightly shaking their icy surface. "Well, I suppose I should start from the start. The place where I reappeared was the place where my old village used to be. They- There were many bad memories that day.

"But I did not get the chance to mourn, immediately. The water had been reclaimed by other things. It was dead water, to me. Full of abyss and decay. So I ran, as fast as I could. There were things in the darkness, things I got away from and would rather not think of again." He shivered.

"Then, I was on land. There was a long journey from there. I walked, and walked, and walked. Through forest and meadows and fields of flowers, and jungles and mountains and swamps. It was quiet.

“Of course, there were many monsters, but I ran or fought, and I made my way past all of them. It was not like the darkness left behind or the fields of ash, it was a... simpler journey. And then, finally, I got here!”

He stopped speaking, twirling his tail in contentment, as though he'd told a perfectly complete story. And well, in a way, he had. Mercury didn't really need to get the details, he was just curious if anything interesting had happened. Ruvah didn't seem to think so.

“I'm glad you could make it,” Mercury said, smiling.

“Me too!” Ruvah said.

“Do you... have anything you wanna do from here?”

Ruvah froze over. Entirely, turning into a solid chunk of ice. Mercury could tell, because the swirling and rippling on their surface stopped, and when their tail dropped down a bit, it was accompanied by cracking noises.

“Uhm. I- well. Not really?”

He seemed insecure about it, caught off guard by the question. It was kind of a cruel thing to ask, really. Of course he had no idea what to do with his life. He was like Mercury after the first blood eclipse, except having been thrown into a hostile land, forced to survive, then thrown right back “home”, except it was all gone and destroyed.

Zyl spoke up before Mercury could. “You're welcome to stay in the city a bit, to try and figure out where you'd like to go from here?”

Ruvah slowly turned to the dragon, accompanied by the sound of ice crunching together. “Right. Yes. Okay. Thank you,” he said.

There was a lull in the conversation for a few seconds, until it grew too awkward for Yasashiku to bear. “Mercury-kun here is learning how to smith from me, for example. Could you imagine doing something like that?”

“No, no. I'm bad with fire.”

“Ah, yes, that's fair. I meant anything in that kinda direction. You might be able to work at the farms, too? Grow some food and all that,” the old man suggested next.

“Food? Yes, growing food. Right, I see. Plants need water, of course. I can... Maybe I can do that,” he said, a small smile finding its way to his face.

Ruvah thawed a little, and Mercury smiled. Briefly, he considered becoming a farmer, too. Just bringing water to crops, tending to them, learning Skills to grow them better...

Then he turned to Yasashiku. The old man's eyes were boring holes into him. Without speaking a word, he moved his lips, and Mercury could tell what he was saying. “Don't you dare,” he subvocalized, fire in his gaze.

Mercury swallowed heavily, then decided that perhaps, considering his own health, he could stand to maybe *not* pick up anything new. He'd asked Yasashiku to teach him how to smith, so he was going to learn that, first. Then he could pick up new things.

The old man had suffered enough interruptions, really. Was the most recent one necessary? Probably not, either.

"Actually, on the note of Mercury learning from me," Yasashiku suddenly continued, ripping Mercury from his train of thought. "What exactly happened for you to pass out there, last time, Mercury-kun?"

Like a deer in headlights, the mopaaw stared back. "I, uhm. I evolved a Skill."

"Skill evolutions do not cause that kind of bleeding, Mercury," Zyl - the traitor! - said.

"Okay yes so mayyyybe I was unhappy with my options and wanted multiple and asked if there was a way of my evolved <Appraisal>, and then I kinda went and did that...?" Mercury shrunk into himself as he talked, worried about the rebuttal.

"Of course you did," Yasashiku sighed.

"Of course you did," Zyl slowly dragged his hand over his face.

"You did?!" Ruvah asked, surprised. "I mean, uhm, of course! But. That's not really something that happens? How did you do it?"

"Well, it was <Telekinesis>, which I now evolved into <Force of the Hecatoncheires>. Which lets me... well, what, actually?" With a small force of mind, he called up a box, explaining the Skill, before relaying to the others what it did.

[<Force of the Hecatoncheires>: An advanced Skill that allows for manipulation of ethereal force with the mind. You possess ghostly arms with the ability to shape them however you wish, into applications of force in a large space around you.]

The description was short, but it told him all he needed to know. With a gentle push, Mercury reached out to the Skill, and felt his senses change. He did suddenly have dozens of hands, floating around him, behind his back. They were malleable, too, right now all condensed into a single, small orb.

It was the size of a fist, and would not go any smaller than that, hovering right above his back. This was as small as it went, but Mercury could tell there was quite a bit of power in there. At a small tug, a single hand separated out from the collective, leaving the orb slightly weakened, but giving him a digit to control.

"Whoa," he said, moving the invisible hand around. He could tell exactly where it was. When he tapped the table with it, though, the strange part was that he could *feel* the table.

He ran an invisible finger along the wood, and he could feel the finishing oil on top of the wood, and then he turned a part of the hand intangible and could feel the grain of the wood underneath the varnish.

For a moment, he considered trying out how much force he could apply - then rapidly decided against testing that. The original Hecatoncheires Skill had already scaled with strength... if these ghostly hands were as strong as his real ones, he could probably pick up trees with them.

Not exactly the kind of strength suitable for use in a regular house.

"That's a very good Skill," Yasashiku said. "You can use that for forging, I suppose. Properly, too, not like <Telekinesis>. Pick up a hammer and slam it down."

"I'm happy for you Mercury, but was it worth all the blood?" Zyl asked, a slight sadness in his voice. He was still worried, then.

Mercury took a deep breath. "It was," he said, convinced. "I don't want to worry you, Zyl. But you have to let me grow how I want to. I can make my own decisions, you know?"

The dragon gave his boyfriend a long look, then his shoulders slumped a little. "You're right," he said. "I know you are, but I don't like seeing you get hurt."

"Me neither, but it will happen again. I'm gonna get burnt sometimes, and that's okay. Trust me, please?" Mercury stared into his partner's eyes.

"I- Okay. I'll try."

With his newfound digits, Mercury wrapped Zyl in a quick hug. It felt a little strange, but since he could actually get tactile feedback from the ghostly hands, it was nice. The most human-like interaction he'd done in a bit, well, other than talking of course.

"I see why the Skill was hard to achieve. Does it have a limit on the arms?" Ruvah asked.

Mercury didn't reply immediately, instead testing it. He took out more and more arms, but after only eight of them, the orb at his back dissolved. So, eight was the full power he could manage. Except.

He summed another one, and felt all existing ghostly arms grow a little more faint. He moved them further out, and they grew fainter as well. Right, okay then.

"They work better immediately around me. I can run eight arms at full power, which probably means a bit higher than my physical strength. If I move them too far out, they get weaker, too, but I think I can move them quite far before that'll become an actual problem."

"Try shaping it," Yasashiku said.

Right. Mercury did so. As soon as he gave the mental push, the arms disintegrated into the familiar, ethereal, formless shape of <Telekinesis>, except that his control over it was so much more delicate, and there was so much more of it overall.

Just as a test, Mercury spread it out evenly as far out as he could, which was apparently about a hundred meters, then applied the force downwards.

Gravity seemed just a little stronger in a hundred meter radius around the house, though the effectiveness definitely dropped off with distance. Mercury felt it on himself, too. Lifting his paw became quite a bit harder, though spreading the force thin made it less of a bother. At the edge of the area, even though he used just as much of his reserve, the force was a lot weaker, barely an inconvenience.

“That’s... not too bad,” Yasashiku said, sounding slightly disappointed.

“It’s in a hundred meter radius around me,” Mercury said, already eliciting a small gasp from the smith. “Let me just...”

Mercury pulled the force all back into the sphere he’d held at his back, a tiny ball of power. He willed it to be formless, not applying the force in any direction at all. “I need something we can break.”

With a small swipe of his tail, Ruvah summoned a ball of ice. It was a little larger than Mercury’s sphere of force, but it would easily do. Gently, he placed the sphere of power into the ice.

It hovered there, doing nothing, until Mercury willed it to apply an inward, crushing force.

Not... a whole lot happened. Right, it was clear ice. You couldn’t exactly compress that. Hm. With a quick shift of mind, he instead applied a pulling force, directing one half up, while holding the other half in place.

Instantly, the sphere tore in half perfectly, the top bit accelerating fast enough to shoot into the ceiling and shatter against the wood in just the few moments it spent inside the force.

Mercury had the distinct feeling that he could use it to quite easily carve into wood. Maybe even bend metal. Which was a strange thought.

Yasashiku slowly ran his finger over the bottom half on the sphere, which had remained perfectly in place. It was a very smooth cut, the kind Mercury would usually have used <Sever> for. “Precise, too. I like this ability a lot.”

There was a glint in the old man’s eye. “You’ll be working it a lot, soon.”

Zyl nodded slowly. “That... might have been worth the bit of blood.”

Mercury got the distinct impression that cutting the sphere was not what had impressed him. In fact, Zyl’s pale face seemed a little red. He must have still been flushed from the hug. The thought made Mercury grin.

Ruvah flicked his tail again as he cleaned up the space. Shards of ice turned back into water, then collected back into him. There was a dent in the ceiling, not too large though, since the ice easily shattered.

That could have happened, too, when Mercury compressed it. But it hadn’t, because the Skill was too precise. It was equal pressure all around. To compress the ice further, he’d have had to... apply enough force to break the molecular bonds? Huh.

Maybe it was better that he didn't do that.

Mercury smiled, though. This was a good Skill. He was glad to have opposable thumbs back. He also enjoyed just how colourful the world was, now. So many little notifications to read, still, but he'd deal with those in a bit.

The rest of the afternoon was spent catching up with Ruvah.