

Chapter 198: Trials

Before the challenge there was the baptism to go through. This would happen in the same order that the courts were allowed in, which meant the ruler of Skye went first.

The fae made from fluffy clouds and frozen bolts of lightning descended the stairs once again. It spoke.

“Any fae who wishes to join the court of Skye may step forward.” The voice was soft and gentle, surprisingly, and felt as fluffy as Mercury imagined a cloud would. Not even a stormcloud, but a regular, calm one.

There was a bit of a drawn out silence, until one fae stepped forward from the courtless. Another two swiftly followed, now that they weren’t the first ones.

Another few moments of waiting passed, but no one else stepped forward, and the cloud-fae of Skye nodded slightly. As they did so, Mercury watched one of the recesses in the floor fill with a blue substance, with puffy white things in it. It seemed a lot like a piece of the sky had been trapped there.

The ruler of Skye pointed at one of the courtless. “Step forward,” they commanded.

Quickly, the fae obeyed, making their way towards the ruler. Inevitably, their journey led them to the edge of the sky-pond. They paused in front of it, unsure. “Step into the court of Skye, and be borne anew,” the ruler said.

For a few more moments, the unaffiliated fae hesitated, then quickly nodded, and took another step forward. Their foot sunk deep into the mirage of the sky. Another step, and they sunk even deeper, down to their navel. Mercury was sure that the recess in the floor had not been deep enough for that to happen, but it did anyway.

Another step later, and the fae was submerged up to their neck, now right in front of the ruler of Skye. The cloud fae sat down at the edge of the pond, dangling their legs into it, then leaned forward, placing one of their hands gently on the younger fae’s head. It was strange, seeing such a gentle motion be done with such a sharp-clawed hand.

“Welcome to my court,” they said, quietly and with gravitas, yet not unkindly, then pressed the head of the younger fae underwater. There was an absolute silence for a few moments, then the ruler of Skye moved their hand back out of the strange substance.

The shell of the unaffiliated fae had changed. Vines were replaced with trails of lightning, bark with fluffy clouds. Their eyes had changed, too, from a green hue to a soft blue glow.

It hadn’t looked painful, but the fae was most certainly different. Mercury could see that the hue he saw around them had changed, too, their entire aura no longer the same. What a strange transformation.

He watched the other two fae go through it as well, and only one of them went under and immediately began desperately thrashing, as if they were being drowned. The ruler of Skye simply shushed them, like one might do to a pet... or someone they were murdering.

It was mildly disturbing, seeing a hand go under, then emerge again, changing slightly with every splash of the strange, sky blue liquid. Eventually, the thrashing stopped. A couple minutes later, another member of Skye emerged.

The whole procedure, for all three fae, had taken barely ten minutes. It was rather ritualistic. When it was done, the ruler of Skye themselves stepped into the recess in the floor, spending no more than a few seconds, never sinking further than the actual recess would allow.

With them inside, the liquid drained again, until only a thin sheet at the very bottom of the pool remained, though it still faked the depth of a whole sky. Mercury knew it could only be half an inch deep at best, but despite that, it also felt like he was staring through a window into the atmosphere.

So strange.

Next up was the court of Salt. Their pool looked like an ocean, understandably, and four different fae volunteered.

Then came Chill. Their "pool" looked like a sheet of ice, but it was still clearly liquid. This time, more fae stepped forward, seven in total. The interesting part was that one of those came from the court of Dust, wanting to change their allegiance.

Mercury heard a few people gasp at that, but no one interfered. The fae was allowed to go forward, step into the pool, and emerge changed. So were all the unaffiliated ones.

Fourth came Shadow, and their pool, predictably, looked like a mass of writhing darkness. Then there was Rust, with an orange, flakey liquid, bits of aged iron floating in it. It lacked much of the grace Mercury had felt from the other courts, but it still served its function.

When Mellow's turn came, the pool was a pile of amber leaves. Oberon got the process dealt with rather quickly. Then came Illusion, their pool an iridescent film, kind of like a thin oil spill, though the colour swirled and Mercury could see shapes in it if he let his mind wander.

Dust's turn came, their pool one of ash. Finva had a single person join their court, and the ceremony was slow, but graceful. After them was Scorch. The burning pool that they summoned looked like one of those close ups of the sun, including little arcs of flame mimicking solar flares as well.

After Scorch came Blood, which made the whole hall fill with a metallic smell, which faded only once they left. Allure conjured a pool that seemed pinkish, with images of hearts dancing over it, but Mercury could tell it was a thin facade. More than anything, the surface of Allure's pool felt fake.

Finally, it was Spring's turn, and the pool filled with green grass, some of it blossoming into flowers. Strangely, that grass still sprouted from a liquid beneath, though even that liquid seemed to Mercury like it would simply feel like going through extremely tall grass.

Titania blessed more than a handful of fae, allowing them into her court. She retained a smile during all of it.

After that, the first set of inauguration was finally done. There were still a handful of unaffiliated fae, such as Alice and Arber. A few more rugged fae also stood on that side, and a few very, very dangerous looking ones also stood without a court. Of course, Mercury himself was in the same situation.

Queen Titania gracefully ascended back to her throne, leaving a thin coating of grass in the twelfth basing. All of them were still, somewhat, filled. The queen spoke again, after getting seated. "Now then. The remaining unaffiliated members will receive trials to complete. If they succeed, they may remain as such. Before a trial is administered, any courts who wish to have the individual join them may stake their claim, then decide on a trial together."

Right, of course they did.

This, apparently, was also done one by one. The previous inauguration ceremony had lasted a little over an hour. Mercury imagined that this may take the rest of the day.

At least he wasn't the first to be called forward. That honor went to an old fae, Mercury recognized. The aura around them was powerful, densely packed around their body, but confined. It wasn't authority, it was pure personal power.

Seven of the courts wanted them. The old faerie was mostly humanoid, with two arms and two legs, though they were wreathed in a dense mist of steel grey. Underneath it, Mercury caught glimpses of a skeleton, though its bones looked like they were made from bronze. Combined with the eye sockets carrying amber flames, they kind of looked like a lich that got its colour grading wrong.

Titania spoke, once again. "The courts have spoken. Skye, Salt, Shadow, Rust, Mellow, Blood, Dust stake their claims. Decide on a trial, rulers."

There was a brief silence, and Mercury could only assume that some fae communication shenanigans must have happened, since after a few seconds, it was queen Titania who spoke again.

"A trial has been decided. Your diligence will be tested."

Instantly, the room shifted. Rather than the pleasant hall they were in before, Mercury found himself on a mountaintop. The lich-like fae stood in the center, just below a purple sphere, hovering above them.

"You must diligently protect the sphere until it is full of your mana. Good luck."

A moment later, the sphere fell, though the fae easily caught it. Instantly, they sat down, placing the purple orb in their lap, and channelling mana through it. Mercury felt the air tremble slightly at the volumes of power, but he didn't move a muscle.

He was just a spectator, after all, and spectate he did. A few seconds passed, then a dozen, when he noticed a buzzing in the air. Another dozen seconds later, human sized bugs began swarming the mountaintop.

Every single one of the bugs zoomed towards the orb. The buzzing grew all consuming, yet the lich did not move. Any bug that approached simply went limp, stopped beating its wings, and plummeted to the ground, rapidly dying.

There was no fanfare or grand action. Simple death. As quick and as insidious as it could be.

A whole minute ticked by, and the bug corpses would have begun stacking were the bottom ones not flaking apart into dust.

Two minutes passed, and the orb was growing a bright purple, the bugs plummeting towards it like moths to a flame. Its glow became brighter by the second, the mana in the air only growing denser. Eventually, an even larger bug, almost elephant sized, appeared, and the lich still did not move.

It approached, then hit an invisible barrier. Its proboscis disintegrated first, then its legs, then the wings, until it, too, became dust.

Then, the orb was filled, and Mercury was back in the hall. "You have passed your trial," Titania announced, and with a nod, the lich stepped back.

Another challenger was chosen, stepped forward, and had only two courts vie for them. A trial was given, one of health. They were afflicted with a disease and told to heal themselves. Slowly but surely, they failed, their shell breaking apart.

By the end, nothing was left. Then, in the blink of an eye, they were restored. The courts decided who took them.

Blood's ruler was a strange thing, a giant floating construct of crimson. They had three head, each different, one as though carved from metal, a disfigured face with a ring of sharp spikes coming from it, the next somewhere between a dragon and a horse, with an elongated face, facsimile scales covering it, and the third that of a bat, yet with ram's horns growing from the top of its head, and its face as well, spiralling and growing back into the blood.

It was a monstrosity, and it viciously descended on the neutral fae. The courtless was still confused, having just lost their shell and been restored, so it couldn't resist Blood's ruler at all.

Appendages ending in maws closed around the one that had just failed their trial.

They struggled and flailed, but it didn't matter. The ruler of Blood dragged them towards its basin in the end, shoving the once-neutral fae down into the crimson liquid until they stopped thrashing. Then, they were withdrawn, now changed, and the ruler of Blood spoke.

“Welcome to the court of Blood,” it said, their voice a strange, guttural gurgle. The newcomer did not reply, simply being dragged to where the rest of the court stood and thrown in with them while the ruler of Blood ascended back up to its throne.

Mercury did not much enjoy the macabre display.

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The trials continued. One after another, fae were picked, the room changed, and they either succeeded or failed. Some took their loss graciously, others were dragged off and submerged. It was never enjoyable to watch.

Eventually, Alice’s turn came.

“Eleven of the courts have staked their claim, all but Blossom. Decide on a trial, rulers.”

A pause.

“A trial has been decided. Your suffering will be tested.”

The room changed. Alice was placed in the middle of a burning village. Humans were dying around her. Mercury felt his stomach lurch.

He didn’t know if it was real or not. It could as well be an illusion as it could be a teleportation. These might be real people. Knowing the fae? They probably were.

“You mustn’t help,” Titania declared. “Watch, and suffer.”

And so Alice suffered.

One after another, buildings caught fire, people screamed, ran out with burning clothes. Some dropped themselves on the floor and rolled, but the dry grass easily caught flame, too. They burnt to death.

Mercury felt his blood boil when he heard children crying.

His heart broke a bit when one of them ran up to Alice, clutching at the hem of her dress. “Help. Please,” the child asked.

Alice looked at it, crying. “Sorry.”

The child burnt to death.

Eventually, the trial ended. Alice’s face was stoic, a stony mask of indifference, but Mercury knew she was angry. So very, very angry.

Then came Arber’s turn.

“Four of the courts have staked their claim, all four seasons. Decide on a trial, rulers.”

A pause.

“A trial has been decided. Your existence will be tested.”

The room shifted. Mercury was a spectator, of a single sapling, lost in a great forest. Time seemed to speed up. The tiny sapling grew, first into a small tree, and Mercury saw magic coursing through it. That was Arber, then.

Once it was as tall as a human child, the forest caught fire.

It all burnt down, into a husk of ash, and the sapling itself, too, began smouldering. It caught on fire. It burnt.

Arber stood there, burning, for what for them must have been half a year. They stood, burning, barely remaining alive with dregs of mana, for that time, until finally, mercifully, rain descended.

The ash soaked into the ground, so much of it that the soil turned acidic, but Arber lived. Beasts came and ate at their leaves, but Arber lived. Humans tried uprooting them, and Arber lived.

Two decades passed, until they had grown into a strong, wide tree. They began reshaping themselves, compressing a dimension inside them, and then the trial suddenly ended. They had proven that their existence was worthwhile. That they could continue to exist by themselves.

Arber's avatar stepped back into the crowd. Without a face, some people might struggle to read their expression, but Mercury knew. The feather on their hat slumped slightly. They were tired, worn down, and wished to simply lay on their back and rest.

A few more fae were challenged in between, until finally, it was Mercury's turn.

Queen Titania said something she had never spoken before, her smile growing eerily wider.

“Twelve courts have staked their claim. All of us. Decide on a trial, rulers.”

That... did not bode well.

“Your trial has been decided. Your-”

She stopped. The silence hang heavily in the air. No one dared to speak.

Titania looked upon Mercury. She stared at him, mundanely, without all the pressure from before. She took a deep breath.

“*All* courts have staked their claim. Decide on a trial, *rulers*.”

Something felt different. This “all” was not the same as the previous one. Gears started turning in Mercury's head.

He knew the fae had more faction. The empty thrones. And lady Whisperblossom had warned him of another faction. The deserted courts. Were they related? Did the empty

thrones rule the deserted courts? Or were they different? Unfortunately, his time for thinking ran out.

"Your trials have been decided. Your worthiness will be tested. Your belief will be tested."

Muttering erupted inside the chamber, and for once, it didn't change instantly.

"... Why am I being faced with two trials?" Mercury decided to ask.

The queen stared at him, her purple eyes seemingly boring into his soul, looking for what gave him the audacity to question her. "It was decided as such," she answered, almost flippantly.

Mercury stared back. "That seems rather unfair."

"I did not make that decision, not on my own, at least. We all judged it to be the fairest outcome. For us, and for you," she explained.

"You don't wanna have this conversation," Mercury noted.

"Neither do you," the queen hissed, her careless facade suddenly breaking. "Stop your meaningless pride and *finish your trials*."

The room remained the same. "You need me to agree to start them," he said, gasping slightly.

Everyone turned dead silent.

Titania, faerie queen, monster as old as the world itself, looked at Mercury. Her eyes blazed magenta, brightly enough to leave a burning trail on his retinas. "Accept them," she commanded.

Mercury tilted his head. He didn't think pissing off the faerie queen anymore would be a very wise decision for his health. But he really, really didn't wanna take this lying down. "I want an additional reward," he said simply.

"*What?!*"

"Nothing major," he said. "Just a thousand Skill points. A pittance, really." His smile didn't waver.

The faerie queen fixed him in her gaze, angrily, but paused. The rulers seemed to communicate again. "Acceptable," she hissed.

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[Side Quest: "Faerie Trial"]

Condition: Succeed on your trials.

Reward: 1000 Skill points

Patron: Faerie Queen Titania]

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Mercury smiled at the nice bit of reassurance. "I accept the trials."

"Then that of the twelve courts will commence first," Titania said, her mask of impassive calm back in place.

Instantly, the room shifted. Rather than wood, Mercury found himself standing on grass and wet sand, on the shore of a lake. There were trees around the lake, marking the edges of the clearing, and a tall rock hanging over the pristine waters with three stone menhirs atop it.

Mercury felt a gentle wave splash against his paws. The wind was strong enough to cast small, rippling waves. He didn't see any other faeries anymore, couldn't even feel them, though he suspected that he would be able to if he pierced the veil of iridescence.

That was a trump card he didn't need to unveil so openly.

Instead, Mercury walked around the lake. It was featureless, the sun unmoving in the sky. Time was a bit screwy in the trials, so he did not know how long he had, but there was nothing wrong with getting done sooner rather than later, so he approached the menhirs.

They were blank slates of stone. Tall, impressive, worn down by weather and age. Carefully, he placed a paw on one of them. It glowed softly, a dim, blue flicker, as faint as a match. A moment later, the light shot into the lake.

The waves stopped, although the wind only picked up, and soon, ripples spread among its pristine surface. Perfect, tiny waves, erupting from where that blue glow had struck the surface.

A woman rose from the waters. Long, blonde hair, seaweed woven into a diadem, holding a ruby at her forehead. Only her upper body left the confines of the water, and she slowly drifted towards Mercury.

"It has been long since someone visited me here," she said.

"So it seems," Mercury nodded.

"What brings you here, traveller?" she asked.

"A test. I wish to prove my worthiness."

"Your worthiness? To me?"

"Is there... anyone else I should consider this for?" Mercury asked, cocking his head.

"There are two more menhirs to your side. For my sisters. Perhaps you wish to prove to them that you are worthy?" the lady asked.

Mercury smiled. "Ah. Yes. Let me call on them, too, then."

Soon, two more lights rose, and two more women drifted from the lake towards him. "You have called us."

The winds were picking up, a venerable storm now, but Mercury stood steadfast. "I am supposed to prove my worthiness."

"Then you must delve to the bottom of the lake."

"You must find the ends of the earth."

"You must go to the reaches of the sky."

Mercury smiled. "Consider it done."

Going to the lakebed was not too difficult. <Rainstorm> let him keep the water off. He breathed his own air, walking along the lakebed. Hands sprung forth from it, grasping at his ankles, but he kept walking. Fishmen threw spears at him, but he kept walking. Pixies cast enchanting magic on him, whispering secrets, but he *kept walking*.

And not five minutes later, he reached the bottom of the lake. There was a house of glass. Mercury opened the door. It was dry inside. A bit of seaweed grew from the wet soil. Despite being seaweed, it ended in flower buds. Mercury plucked one of them, then walked back to the surface.

He laid the flower down in a small bowl in front of the respective menhir. The ladies were whispering to each other.

"The ends of the earth, then," he said.

What were the ends of the earth? The earth was really only used because they meant the end of the world they were on. And, well, the world they were standing on didn't exactly have a beginning or an end. Unless...

He made one.

This was more challenging, of course, but Mercury soon fell into ihn'ar, shattering the veils, and finding reality broken and insufficient. "The ends of the earth," he muttered. The pieces of the broken reality rearranged themselves. Deep bits of void reached out, but he asked the <Nothingness> to abate for a few moments, and it listened.

The world rearranged itself.

Its end... was now this very spot.

In front of Mercury, there was a piece of rock. White, and smooth, with streaks of ruby, emerald and sapphire. Somehow, the marble had trapped gemstone veins in it.

Mercury deposited the orb.

Finally, he had to go to the reaches of the sky. Now that was a little more difficult. He was not a bird, he could not fly. <Force of the Hecatoncheires> worked on him, but making himself float was strange with the skill.

“Well, what’s the saying? Something like... your will can give you wings?”

He shook his head, and his mind split into three. His ystirs each held onto a rijn, creating a solid enforcement of his will. He had used it to shatter rocks and mould metal before. His rijn were powerful.

And so, he changed their shape. He had used them as a hammer before, so obviously, he could change them again. Now, with this much practice, shifting them was much easier. All he needed was a thin, solid thing, so he went with something familiar: paper.

Shaping his rijn into what was essentially rigid sheets of paper, he placed one in the air in front of him, then stepped on it. Then he placed another one, and another. By the time he had ascended those, he could move the first one up in front again.

So, Mercury build himself a very literal staircase into the sky. There as a song reference in there somewhere, he noted with mild amusement.

Not too long later, he breached the cloud layer. They hung remarkably low, mainly since this place was probably not quite real. He stepped on the clouds, and they were solid. There was a ruined castle, and a giant’s corpse.

Casually, Mercury walked up to it, to the middle of the castle, where he found a bottle with a cloud trapped in it. That would work, then.

He simply jumped off, spreading his legs wide. <Adaptable> made his fur thicker and bristly, adding to his air resistance. By the end of his fall, his tail looked more like that of a squirrel than a cat. But he landed.

It hurt a little.

[<Fall Damage Reduction> has levelled up! <Fall Damage Reduction lv. 3 -> 5>]

Okay, maybe it hurt a medium amount. But he more than survived, and so had the bottle.

He placed it in the bowl.

It had all taken barely fifteen minutes.

The ladies looked at him, shocked. Mercury looked right back at them. “So, uh, worthy? Yeah?”

“What a strange creature,” the lady of the lake muttered.

“But he passed the challenges,” the lady of the sky said.

“I... cannot find fault with his methodology,” the lady of the earth added.

“Fine then, hero. You pass our trial. As a reward, you shall have the sword in the-”

The trial world faded away.

Back with Arber, it was announced that he had passed his first trial.

“Your second trial begins,” queen Titania announced.

Then, the hall shifted again. This time, rather than a tranquil lake, it was different. He found himself in the halls of a school, and memories darted past his mind.

He had a friend in this academy, someone older than him, someone who had learnt for much longer. They were well regarded among the school, easily influenced by what others thought, and sometimes shifted.

Mercury was there to ground them. His belief in who they were would solidify their existence.

The malignant rumors would not turn his friend sinister, so long as his belief was strong enough. They wouldn't be changed by expectations, not corrupted by their parents' perfectionism, not withered by the disappointment of their teachers.

So long as Mercury held onto that belief strongly enough.

Then, the memory was older. Mercury stood terribly still as the trial began. For a few seconds, he breathed.

Within his stomach, he felt a terrible amount of rage rolling. What a sick fucking joke this trial was. Perhaps, if he gave the fae the benefit of the doubt, it was an exercise made by them to practice getting old Unnrahzil back. But really, he was rather sure they were trying to gauge his limits, so they could put the minimum effort in to corrupt his mentor.

Mercury felt furious. But this trial was also a chance.

‘Hey Appy? Turn on <Training Weights>.’

[Confirmed.]

A weight settled on his mind, a fog that made it hard to remember who his friend was supposed to be, but Mercury's eyes blazed. He would show them just how <Unrestrained> the limits of his belief were.

