

Chapter 208: Blacksmithing Project

Mercury tilted his head at the spirit child. He was a bit wary, but given his most recent experiences, Breeze seemed harmless in comparison. Almost benevolent. "What kind of game?"

The boy put a finger to his chin, dangling his legs as if deep in thought. "Hmmm... What about... tag?"

"Wouldn't that give you an advantage?" Mercury asked with a smirk.

Breeze at least had the decency to blush. "What? N-no!" he stammered. "No, no, you can use all your Skills of course, see, and I won't!"

Mercury huffed. "Okay. But what if someone else gets caught up in the match?"

"Ah... I see, yes, I would not want to run into someone else. Hmmm," the boy hummed again, already unbothered by the previous accusation. "Okay. We can do it outside the city, then!"

"Sure, sure. When-"

"Yay!" Breeze said, springing up and standing on the wall, raising his small fists high into the sky. "Let's go!"

Before Mercury had a chance to reply, a gust of wind slammed into him. He felt clearly that he could resist it, but decided against that, instead letting the gust take him away. This was the kind of more or less harmless behaviour he wanted to encourage more, so he would play along.

A few seconds later, the sudden storm dropped him on the plains outside the city. He shook himself for a moment, letting his fur settle again. Then he looked at the wind sprite. "Breeze," Mercury called.

The boy looked back behind him, stopping in his tracks. He'd been about to run off. "Hm?"

"I do have work to do today, yeah? So, I can't play all day."

He pouted a little. "Fine," he muttered. "I imagined, anyway. Adults are soooo boring."

"If I'm so boring, why'd you ask to play with me?"

Rather than grace that with an answer, Breeze disappeared from the spot. Mercury felt a brush of air go over his side, then. "Tag, you're it!" the childish voice called, already from a distance.

Mercury looked at his leg. Yeah, he would not be doing a large amount of running today, then. That would start hurting his stump quite a bit. Meaning he needed to be strategic.

But he wasn't exactly out of options. He could feel more than see Breeze dancing around a few dozen metres away from him. Too far to properly extend his domain out all that way, but not too far for other measures.

The first thing Mercury tried was turning himself into a shadow.

It was just as strange of an experience as before. One moment he stood there, on solid ground, the next, everything was compressed into a single flat but uneven plane. It felt like all his organs were pressed together a little too tightly.

There was that option of delving deeper, into the flipped world of shadows, but that didn't seem appealing right now. Instead, he bemusedly perceived Breeze through his other senses, watching the spirit's expression filter through surprise and confusion.

Mercury glided across the ground effortlessly and silently, sneaking up on the boy. Then, a moment later, he hid in Breeze's shadow.

This was enough for the boy to notice before he even touched it, and positively *vanish*. It wasn't that he simply turned into thin air - though he probably could - he simply ran so fast that Mercury was rather suddenly ejected from his shadow. Though not before spinning some <Thread>.

The game was on, then.

Mercury darted after the boy, placing traps, constructions and all kinds of clever tricks in front of him. He used <Itinerant> liberally to make his own path faster, and find the trick to winning this particular challenge. Bit by bit, obstacle by obstacle, he wore the wind spirit down, and eventually, after fifteen minutes of chasing, Breeze stumbled.

Crashing to the floor, the boy rolled a few times, then slammed into the side of a tree upside down with a resounding crack. His ephemeral hair whipped back in the impact, now tangled. He flopped down to the ground... then laughed.

It was a pure, bright laugh, unbothered by the burdens of the world. His feet were all tangled up with sticky spider webs. His clothes were stained from the fall, and his skin sported a few thin scrapes, but he laughed anyway. "Again!" he called.

Mercury smiled. "You're it!" he said, then quickly used a <Reinforcement Dash> to disappear into the canopy.

"No fair!" Breeze called from behind, still laughing loudly as he dusted himself off. "You cheated!"

"So I'm not supposed to use Skills, then?" Mercury asked through a grin. "That would be more unfair!"

"Bleh!" Breeze huffed, sticking his tongue out at Mercury. Still, the boy grinned, stretched a little, then darted off into the forest.

Despite the fact that Mercury was much better at running than at catching someone, he was still caught after only a little while. Breeze effortlessly darted through the branches, running, well... like the wind.

Mercury had trouble landing his jumps properly with the prosthetic, but frankly, this was a rather excellent opportunity to get more used to it. Not that he'd recommend it for people with lower vitality for him.

But... it worked.

The boy caught him, and he was to chase again, so Mercury pulled out even more tricks. He created veritable obstacle courses using his rijn and <Force of the Hecatoncheires>, shifting them to match the running boy. H outfitted them with traps, and would damage the path the boy ran on with <Sever>.

He even used <Combat Sense> to get more used to the prosthesis and make his steps more efficient. By using <Tracking>, he was able to find Breeze whenever he strayed a little too far, and by using <Veil> he obscured his own path when chased.

It was fun. Using all these Skills he so often only used in combat for a child's game felt... relieving. Like he wasn't just built to kill.

Mercury smiled. That was a nice thought.

After two hours, despite <Unfatigued>, Mercury laid on the ground, panting heavily. Breeze laid next to him, gasping for breath, staring up into the blue sky. "That was fun, Biso!" the kid said with a bright smile. "Let's do it again sometime!"

"Haha, teach me some of your Skills if you want some real competition," Mercury said between gasps for air.

"Okay!" Breeze agreed readily.

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

How amusing. But he supposed it made sense. If he learnt one thing today, it was that wind was not just free, it was also playful.

Slowly, after a few minutes to catch his breath, Mercury got back up. "I'm glad we played, Breeze."

"Me too."

"I hope you don't mind having me in Stormbraver as much anymore."

The boy's eyes widened, and he shook his head vigorously. "No! Not at all! You're... fun, Biso. I'm glad you're here."

Mercury smiled. "That's good, then. We'll play again sometime?"

"Yeah!"

With a smile, Mercury got up from the floor. "It's a deal, then. Can you get me back to the smithy?"

"Hm? Oh, yeah, of course. See you later, Biso!" Once more, the kid acted before Mercury had a chance to reply.

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Mercury found out that Breeze's aim was a little inaccurate when he slammed into the stone ceiling of the smithy. He definitely *felt* the impact, but luckily, with all his Skills working in tandem and his rather resilient body, he came away largely unharmed, except for what would be a bruise.

He couldn't help but smile slightly, though. 'Was this what people meant when they say it's raining cats and dogs?'

Bemused at his own joke, Mercury hopped down from the roof, landing a little more gracefully now after practicing so much running. His stump did feel a little raw though, so he unsummoned the Dream of Starvation, and laid down in the sun.

Yasashiku eyed him warily. "Nothing about you seems broken," the old man grumbled.

"Nothing is."

"Then why are you slacking?" Yasashiku asked, with a hint of mirth.

Mercury let out a low groan, but got back onto his legs. "More nails?"

"Kuh, no, no. Enough nails. Make what you want," he said.

"... What I want?"

"Yes. You need practice shaping metal, hammering metal, tempering metal. Just raw practice. You can make sharp edges, or smooth sides. Try making different types of tools. Rasps, spokeshaves, knives, things with multiple handles. Do some woodworking. Make something that's *yours*. You've got enough skill for that by now."

The old man said it all so genuinely that Mercury kind of just... froze for a moment. Then he took a deep breath and smiled. "I'd been wondering what to get Zyl as a gift."

Yasashiku nodded. "Always nice to make something useful. He cooks, right?"

"... Yeah, how did you know?"

He shrugged. "You two live alone. You have a habit of getting injured. He cares for you. Seemed logical. Make him a cast iron skillet, if you want. Anything that's made from metal and wood I can teach you to make, and make it well at that."

Mercury smiled. "A skillet sounds like a nice project."

“A lot of finishing work, there,” the old man shrugged. “Not much hammering. Most of it is in making the mould and shaping the final piece.”

“You know, that makes sense, given that it’s called a cast iron pan, not a hammered iron pan.”

“Blacksmiths are a practical crowd,” the old man said with a smirk. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, my hands have recovered from the electric shock enough to keep working on your javelins.”

Mercury blinked. “... Right. Uhm, good luck with that?”

Yasashiku gave a chuckle, lifting his hammer over his shoulder. “Thank you. I will make sure to take care. You work on your projects.”

“I will.”

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And so, the day went on. Mercury made a mould from a pan that he borrowed from Marcel. He used a sand mixture Yasashiku had available that was also reasonably easy to replicate for him. Briefly, he wondered if he could also just hold the metal in place himself with his Skills, but decided to abandon the thought.

There were probably complex processes involved in how it cooled and whether some of the sand absorbed into the surface or something. Maybe not that second part.

About halfway through melting the metal from some ingots that Yasashiku had in the seemingly never ending labyrinth of his storage. Actually, Mercury was *reasonably* sure there were some space magic shenanigans going on there.

Or maybe some kind of toolbox skill at play. He didn’t see any runes, but they could also be carved inside the bricks-

“You’re losing focus, Mercury,” Juno chided him from the sides.

He flinched for a moment, his fur bristling, then quickly setting down. He had of course told the wolf he was back. She largely lived with him and Zyl these days, though Mercury was protective of their private space as a couple.

Not that Juno was particularly invasive at all. She respected him a lot.

Mercury gave her a long look, then smiled. “I was, thank you.” He resumed his projects instead of ambling.

“Is this a gift?” she asked him.

“Yes, for Zyl.”

“Would you make me one as well, eventually?” she asked, her tone still perfectly neutral.

The mopaaw turned to her. “I assume you do not mean a frying pan.”

Juno chuffed with amusement. "No, I do not."

"What kind of gift would you like?"

The wolf tilted her head. "I assumed it being a surprise was half the fun."

Mercury paused, then nodded. "I suppose so. I'll see what I can do."

"I think I would like two gifts, maybe three," Juno pointed out. Her cadence was still calm, but Mercury heard hints of amusement. "That is how birthday customs are supposed to work, is it not?"

He laughed out loud at the wolf's demands. "Sure, Juno. I'll make you your gifts, yeah? You gotta be patient with me though."

She smirked, showing glistening fangs. "Have I ever given you reason to doubt my patience?"

"That you haven't," Mercury said, shaking his head.

With a smile, Juno nodded at him. "Thanks, Mercury," she said, trying to sound casual. "I appreciate it." Then, having said her piece, the wolf simply took a few steps back, laid on the ground, and faded into the background again.

Her ability to disappear was kind of eerie. He imagined that was what his <Veil> felt like to other people, too. His eyes almost brushed over her. She emitted no mana, and almost didn't seem to have a shadow, as if turning translucent to light.

She looked at him with eyes that told him to get back to work already, and he laughed a little as he shook his head. She was right, of course. He needed to focus. Mercury went back to finishing up the skillet.

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A day drifted by like that. When he was casting, Ruvah came to visit him as well. He'd settled into the town well by now, living at the lake. Apparently, he made a decent living doing some fishing, or helping boats get out and back in faster.

Kind of like a guardian spirit of the lake.

Mercury smiled at that description. It suited Ruvah well, he thought. This kind of job. A guardian spirit... he'd been his guardian spirit as well, hadn't he? Back in the ashen plains. Mercury almost smiled fondly for a moment, then remembered that it had not been that nice a time.

Ruvah tilted his head at him. "Bad memories?"

"Mmh, just went down a train of thought," Mercury hummed.

"Ah," Ruvah said, understanding. "I see. Yes. It happens to me too, sometimes. Can I comfort you?"

“How?” Mercury asked.

Ruvah tilted his head. “That’s why I asked if I *can*. It was to give you a choice on what you need.”

“Ah,” Mercury said. “That makes sense.” He stopped, then thought. “Yes, I’d like it if you could drape your tail over my shoulders.”

His liquidy friend had once again mimicked Mercury when interacting with him. By now, Ruvah had picked up a <Language> skillstone to interact more easily, but the adjustment for them was quite big, since their original language was apparently rather different. So, they liked the cat-shape quite a bit. No one expected him to be able to talk that way.

“Like this?” Ruvah asked, doing as Mercury requested.

The tail was rather cool as it laid down on Mercury’s fur. The icy surface wasn’t freezing cold, strangely, though he was sure <Adaptable> also contributed to that. Instead, the cold felt grounding.

Mercury took a deep breath, reminding himself where he was currently. That the ordeal was over. He breathed in, then out. Opening his eyes, he smiled at his watery friend. “Thank you. That helped.”

Ruvah gave him a beaming smile. “I’m glad!” There was a lull of silence for a few moments, before he decided that Mercury seemed ready to move on from the topic. Ruvah glanced at his wooden box with sand in it. “What’s that?” he asked.

“I’m making a cooking utensil for my boyfriend, Zyl,” Mercury explained.

“It does not look particularly suited for cooking,” Ruvah said, tapping an icy claw against the wooden frame that the sand was held in.

“That’s because it is not done yet.”

“Oh,” Ruvah hummed. “I see. How is it done?”

“Well, this is essentially a process to copy a shape,” Mercury began explaining. You surround an object with densely packed special sand, first from one side, then the other. Then you take the object out, put the halves together, and pour in molten metal.”

Ruvah looked a little shocked. “Just like that?”

“Yep.”

“But... it’s sand and wood! Won’t the metal burn through it?” he asked.

Mercury smiled. “No, the sand doesn’t melt easily.”

Ruvah seemed a little confused by that. “You mean to tell me that *sand* is more durable than molten metal?”

“In some ways!”

The water spirit looked at him, then the mould, then at Mercury again. “That makes no sense,” he said.

Mercury laughed. “Let me show you, then. I was about to pour it, anyway.”

His eyes lit up a little again - well, the icy facsimile of eyes. “Yes, please!” Ruvah asked.

Following suit on his promise, Mercury took the crucible full of iron, scraped off the slag, and then poured it into the spout.

Instantly, the metal hissed as it flowed through the sand. Any remaining moisture in the mixture was instantly evaporated, flowing out through more channels. He’d need to clean those up, since some metal would likely flow into them as well, needing to be cut off, and then it could be molten back into ingots or something.

But that would all happen in time. For now, he just needed to let it solidify.

“See,” he said to the water spirit. “The wood isn’t burning.”

Once again, Ruvah tapped the shell. Then they peered into the vent holes. “Huh,” he hummed. “Strange. Your craftsmanship is so weird.”

“What is your crafting like?” Mercury asked.

Ruvah stopped for a moment, then faced him. “Well,” they started, drawing the word out. “Since droplets live migratory lives, we do not have time to craft too much. Most of it is dedicated to being temporary. Things for when we pass by somewhere the second time. A little line of infrastructure left behind.

“Over longer times, that is how routes would form. Other droplets travelled where things were left, creating main routes, and branches. There would be many things, usually made from whatever could be foraged locally. Medical supplies, and objects of convenience, partially. But also art.

“There was the great ice-road, where sculptures were created over decades, addons being made by dozens of sculptors. They would catch the sunlight, as it was close to the surface, refract a hundred times over...” he paused, looking into the sky longingly. “It was beautiful.”

“Did you... need to move around so much, on a larger scale, though? Surely stagnation can be held at bay by just moving locally?” Mercury asked.

Ruvah nodded. “Oh, it can. It is more difficult, though. But there are many methods to deal with stagnation. We also had healers, who would purge foreign bodies from our own with select Skills. Kind of like what you did for me, but on a far smaller scale.” The water spirit gave Mercury a faint smile.

“I see. Perhaps, one day, you can take me to see this ice-road?” he asked.

“Gladly!” Ruvah said. “I do not know all routes by heart, nor could I instantly tell you where it is, but all it would take is to find one path. Then, we would eventually find our way back into a part of the network I knew.”

Mercury smiled. “Then it’s a promise. Some day, we’ll explore those paths together.”

“It’s a promise!”

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Ruvah spent some more time idling around with Mercury, simply chatting. The two got along quite well. By the time Ruvah left, she was going by “she” again. She had also left with the promise of bringing Mercury some examples of how the droplets made art, and what their cooking was like.

Mercury imagined that the food of creatures of sentient water like them would be rather different from what he usually consumed, but Ruvah assured him it would be fine. He was rather special, after all. He’d figure out a way to enjoy it.

That was, the rest of the day ticked by. Mercury mostly finished up the pan, cutting off the bigger chunks of metal and beginning the finishing process, but didn’t quite get one before the daylight faded.

Oh well, there was always tomorrow.

... He frowned a little at that idea.

Mercury knew he liked it in Stormbraver. He thoroughly enjoyed not needing to go fast every day of his life. But he also knew that he had made promises in the fae realm. Agreements that benefited him, but also ones he would need to put work in towards.

There was the tree he needed to inspect for one of the courts. There was Daryel and her hunt for the broken thrones. He needed to remember old Uunrahzil more, and queen Titania would most likely ask for his help in repairing things quite a bit.

Then, there was the looming threat about the other wandering arches, like the ashen plains had been. He knew they would arrive eventually.

Really, he did not want to let his peaceful days be interrupted at someone else’s behest this time. Mercury let out a long sigh. Soon. He would return to the fae realm soon.

But this time, he was going to make sure that it was on his terms.