

Chapter 205: A Slice of Life

After coming home, Mercury ate with Zyl. He talked a bit about what happened in the fae realm, and the way he'd been treated. He talked about everyone he'd met; who he'd befriended and who seemed to dislike him.

Well, none of the fae seemed to rally dislike him for any particular reason. It was more that some of them seemed to want to use him, and he wasn't exactly excited about that idea. So, they were enemies, in a lot of ways.

Not that it really mattered now. Zyl got angry a few times, but Mercury waved him off. "It's fine," he said. "They're just fae. It's who they are." Of course, that didn't mean he'd forgiven them. But he was a little too tired to care right now. "If you wanna get angry, we can do that tomorrow."

Zyl looked at his boyfriend. He'd lost a leg, and his fur was stained with blood and dirt. "Yeah," Zyl said with a sad smile. "Tomorrow, then."

Mercury gave him a small smile at that. "Awesome. Then, if you don't mind, I'll be passing out from bloodloss, now." And he did just that.

In fact, Mercury fell unconscious before he even heard Zyl say "Wait, what?"

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Somewhat surprisingly, Mercury did dream that night. The least exhausted of his ystirs was still able to dream. Mercury felt rather bad, though. His astral self was exhausted and drained. He felt wispy and disjointed.

But his surroundings? They did not.

Mercury woke up inside his dreamscape. The place that seemed intrinsically connected to his mind. The grassy plains under a patchwork sky. Except, the grass had changed a little.

After absorbing parts of the threads from Joy's jungle, the grass in Mercury's dream was more vibrant. It grew taller; where before it had barely reached his lower leg, it now reached slightly above his knee. But that was not the most noticeable change.

Much more visibly, the grass now had a rainbow sheen. It wasn't quite as iridescent as the jungle had been, but it was certainly noticeable, even if you weren't looking at it. The grass looked a little like bismuth crystal, shimmering with colours.

"That's so gay," Mercury muttered. "I love it to bits."

He took a moment to hobble in a small circle. The grass was still soft. It looked like blades of grass, but no matter where you touched them, there didn't seem to be any edge. All sides were soft and welcoming. Mercury yawned.

"Tired, boss?"

"Yeah," Mercury said. "Been a long day." Then it clicked. He didn't recognize that voice; it wasn't whisperchild. "Wait. Who're you?" The mopaaw raised his head, looking around in alarm.

"Ain't no need to sweat it," the voice returned. "I'm just a little guy. Just a little dude."

"Where are you?" Mercury asked vigilantly.

There was an offended huff. "Down 'ere, big shot!"

Following the direction of the noise, Mercury looked down. And... there was a strange creature, there. Mercury could have sworn it looked a little like a caterpillar, but then he blinked and it looked a bit like a rabbit or wolf instead. At the same time, it shot him a mischevious, catty grin.

"Oh."

Another huff. "Yeah, "oh"'s right, boss-man. Always overlooking the lil guy, eh? Classic."

Mercury blinked in mild confusion. "I'm-" he stopped himself. "I did not mean to offend you. What is your name?"

"We haven't got one. Shit happens." The creature gave its best impression of a shrug. "Oh, and don't worry about apologizing or any of the typical stuff. We ain't no snitch."

"... Right," Mercury said hesitantly. Then, he took a deep breath. "Can we take this from the top? Who are you, what are you doing here, type deal?"

"Hm? Oh, yeah, for sure. Sorry, we though you'd already know it all. Right, then. We're here cuz you took a bite outta Joy's realm, and we're kinda part of that," they explained.

"Okay. I'm following."

"So, since we were tied to that realm, constantly unravelling, we also disintegrated with it. As it all collapsed in onto you, so did we. Then, your, uh, nexus? Thing. It absorbed some of our threads. Aaaaand, so here we are."

Mercury tilted his head. "I only see one creature."

"Ah, yeah," they admitted, "the four of us kinda got mixed together. Something about grafting and melding and our weaves, according to the system. All gibberish to us. Don't matter, anyway. We just are what we are."

"Fair enough." Mercury shrugged. "Then, what are you planning to do now?"

The creature seemed pleased with the question. "Eat grass."

"Is... that all?"

"Yea, pretty much. Well, you're the boss, of course. If you want us to be building castles you gotta tell us so, otherwise, we won't be doing much," they said, shrugging again.

"Why am I your boss?" Mercury asked.

They laughed. It was a strange, overlaying sound that seemed to echo in on itself.

"Tritatatata! Well, if we'll be living here, we gotta follow yer rules. That means if you say dig, we'll dig. So long as it's reasonable, we won't be making and trenches in minutes."

"So I'm... kinda like your landlord?" Did that make him a homeowner? A ho-meow-ner? He stifled a giggle.

The creature raised an eyebrow. "Want us to call you 'lord' now? Sure, lordy."

"Boss is fine," Mercury said hastily. He didn't quite feel comfortable digging into the whole kingdom thing again yet. Maybe one day. Though now, he barely felt comfortable even leasing out a place to someone. "Well, uh, is there anything you'd like from me?"

"Sure," they said after a moment of thinking. "We'd like directions on decorating the space. Only so long ya can chew on grass before it turns boring. Want us to make something? We'll figure it out."

"You sound like you have something in mind," Mercury noted.

"A garden," they replied without hesitation. "We wanna... make a garden."

Mercury blinked, then gave a faint smile. "Sure," he said, "fine by me. Just make sure I still have sunny spots to rest."

"You got it, boss!"

"One more thing," Mercury said before the strange amalgamation left to do things. "What should I call you?"

"As stated, we ain't got no name. If you wanna choose one, go for it," they said. "We'll only use it if it's good, tho."

"Kim," Mercury suggested. The creature gave him a weird look, so he explained further. "I, uh, imagined it as a shortening. For chimera. It's a creature made from an amalgamation of other animals. Usually different ones than you, though."

"Kim," they tried the name. Mercury could swear he saw a bit of happiness flash over their face. "Yeah. Kim. We like it. We like it lots. Thanks, boss. We'll register that with the system - and done. Officially Kim. Coolio. Thank you for the name. And for letting us stay. And for stopping the unravelling - that last one is both for us and whatever's left of the originals."

Mercury smiled a little. "Well then, Kim. I'll leave the gardening to you. Some shade would be nice to have. Are you planning on growing anything specific?"

They nodded. "Couple trees. Couple crops. We might needa till some ground, see if we can't get some corn in here. Think you could get us a window to your outside antics? Then we couldmake some popcorn."

"I'll, uh, look into it," Mercury said non-comittally.

"Cool, cool. Yeah, the plan is some apple trees, simple stuff first. Something deep inside us yearns for carrots, too. So those'll needa happen. Got anything you'd want?"

"Actually, yes," Mercury said, thinking back to the garden he'd help improve. "Some flowers. Hyacinth or something would be nice. Can I get you to make gay flower fields?"

"Gay... flower fields?"

"Yeah. You know, arranging flowers so that when viewed from above they're pride flags."

"Pride... flags?" Kim asked.

"Ah, okay. I'll explain. See, where I come from, heterosexuality is the norm and-..."

After a few minutes of explanation, Kim nodded. "Absolutely. The pride flag project shall be initiated, boss!"

Mercury smiled. "Alright, Kim. You do that. I'll be... taking a small nap."

"Sure thing, boss. Smell ya later."

And so, Mercury went to sleep a second time. And on this attempt, he didn't dream at all.

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Morning came and passed Mercury by. When he woke up, it was already a little past noon. Since he hadn't exactly gone to bed late, that meant he'd slept for a good eighteen or so ours.

Zyl was out of bed, and there was a tantalizing smell of food coming from downstairs, so Mercury had a good idea of where the dragon was. A tired smile found its way onto his face.

Lazily, he stood up, swaying a little before properly finding his balance. Then he half-walked, half-hopped to the edge of the bed, before managing a graceless jump to the floor. The stump of his leg ached a bit and he felt rather stiff, but he shook that off and hobbled over to one of his favourite spots.

Thick rays of sunlight entered the room from the window, pleasantly warming the dark, wooden floors. Mercury basked in the warmth, feeling it sooth all the tiny aches in his body, and he stretched.

Bemusedly, he thought about how his perspective had changed. As a human, he was use to all kinds of small twitches and aches, complaining about his bones and age. Now, as a cat, and with his superhuman vitality, he barely ever had that anymore.

Instead, he now almost casually lost limbs and tons of blood, before passing out for hours and waking up okay. What a strange world. Was the minor, constant suffering better or worse than the episodic near-deaths he experienced right now? He genuinely couldn't fully tell.

Shaking his head at the silly ideas, he slowly made his way through the room, exiting the sunny spot again. He was still caked in dried blood. It was, frankly, a kindness that Zyl brought him to the bed and let him sleep in it. Washing the sheets would have to be done with magic - well, that's how it was always done, but still!

Instead of worrying overmuch about that, Mercury made his way to the bathroom. There was a shower there, and he desperately needed one. With <Force of the Heatoncheires>, he turned on the water and had it heated using the built-in enchantments.

The warm water dripped down his sides, wetting his fur. Flakes of red flowed down the drain, and Mercury breathed a sigh of relief. He closed his eyes, moving the showerhead around by feeling, washing his fur thoroughly.

He felt <Adaptable> taking a smaller role in shortening his fur, making it easier to clean, which was kind of amusing. The Skill truly did its best to adapt him to any situation - even if that situation was something as simple as "washing off dried blood".

Mercury also made sure to wash the stump of his leg. Thanks to his incredible constitution, it was mostly scabbed over, but he did not want to risk infection more than necessary, so he let water run over it, too. Should he have washed it before scabbing in that case? Probably, but he was a *little* preoccupied, so he cut himself some slack.

[No infection detected currently. Continuing monitoring.]

"Thanks, Appy," Mercury muttered with a smile.

[Taking care of the dum-dum is the duty and joy of its betters.]

Mercury snorted. "Feeling smug, huh? I think you're just glad I survived."

[This assessment is correct.]

He shook his head. "Shameless! Absolutely shameless." He smiled at his friend's antics, and continued washing off the dried blood. With a little help from some soap and his skills, he found himself clean sooner, rather than later.

Once again relying on his evolved ghost hands, he grabbed a towel and dried himself off as well as he could. Having fur made that impossible to a large degree. Well. He could use ice magic to freeze the water and shake it off, or do any number of things but... no. This was fine.

Dripping a little bit of water, Mercury put his cloakback on, as well as the necklace and ring. He had kept on Irrithuriel's earring in the shower. On one hand, because it worked to keep it on, and on the other... he liked matching with Zyl and didn't wanna take it off.

Then, he summoned the Dream of Starvation. The bloodthirsty, tenebrous steel wove itself into existence from sparks, enveloping his remaining leg. That was, until Mercury commanded it to move.

Turning liquid, the metal snaked off his good leg, and onto the stump. From there, it formed a somewhat poor impression of a cat leg. Since the metal needed time and concentration to shift, he also couldn't exactly make it mimick a knee very well, but he could at least have the bottom remain semi liquid to give it a bit of padding.

It felt a little strange, but Mercury had succeeded in turning the very literally nightmare inducing weapon into... a prosthetic leg. He walked a few unsteady steps with it and smiled. "Yeah, that's better," he murmured to himself. "Much more comfortable."

Prosthetics were awesome. Arber would be so jealous of his pirate cosplay. The tree's avatar didn't have a peg leg. Fricking noob. Mercury cucked to himself as he began making his way downstairs.

Zyl had finished cooking by now. The smell of food filled the dining room, and Mercury felt his mouth water as he headed downstairs.

"Morning, sleepyhead," Zyl greeted him. The dragon must have been alerted by the tapping of Mercury's prosthetic against the wood; the mopaaw's steps were almost noiseless. In fact, even the noise of the prosthetic seemed smothered, affected by his Skills. That was awesome. Mobility aids deserved the same respect as people's bodies after all. He was glad the system supported that.

"Good morning, Zyl," Mercury said.

"I made breakfast," the dragon announced. "You hungry?"

"Ravenous," Mercury answered with a smile. It wasn't *quite* true. <Nutritional Preservation> was still about a sixth of the way full, and while there was still energy stored in it, he could draw on that to keep his hunger at bay. So he wasn't ravenous, but the food smelled delicious, and he was hungry, and he could eat much more than any regular creature his size had any right to.

So, ravenous just had the right ring to it.

"Well, I hope I made enough," Zyl said with a chuckle that Mercury found beyond charming. "Come, sit down. By which I mean hop onto a chair. I'll get you something."

"Thank you, Zyl," Mercury said. He didn't need to be told twice, easily making the jump from the floor to the chair. The landing was a little sketchy because of the leg, but that was to be expected. With his high dexterity and agility, Mercury was still able to stay standing, and prevent a rather short but embarrassing tumble to the floor.

A little later, he was wolfing - well, maybe "lioning", instead - down some food. Zyl had fried some potato things, as well as some toast and egg, and also prepared some cheese. Seeing Mercury dig in, he smiled. "I'll make you some more, Mer."

The mopaaw nodded eagerly. He liked Zyl's cooking. Soon, he also had a salad bowl with some beans and bacon in front of him, as well as a few slices of cake, some more bread with jam, a bowl of cereal, and so on. It was a little awkward to chew it all, but he managed just fine.

By the end, he was well and truly stuffed. "Have I filled thine endless maw?" Zyl teased.

Mercury looked at his boyfriend with a smile. "Yeah, thank you, Zyl. I really appreciate it."

"Of course, Mercury," the elegant man said, giving him a small kiss on the forehead. "I'm glad you're back home."

"How long was I gone, actually?" Mercury asked with a small tilt of his head. "Time got a little screwy at the end, there."

"Thirteen days," Zyl said. "I waited three more than expected. I'd like to think I was really patient. There was no guarantee time was synced, but this seemed about as reasonable as I could be."

Mercury nodded. "Yeah, that makes sense. Thank you for coming for me." He took a sip of tea.

Zyl snorted slightly. He placed a hand on the back of a chair and leaned on it, which Mercury found to make him look rather enticing. "You know, a wise man once told me that that was what friends are for."

The mopaaw choked a little on his tea, coughing for a few moments. "Uuuuhm..."

Expectantly, Zyl raised an eyebrow.

Mercury decided to commit. "Well, uh, this friend of yours must have truly been wise. The wisest, really. A person of valor and integrity."

Once more, Zyl huffed in amusement. "I'm just glad you're safe."

"Me too, Zyl. Me too."

The two settled into a companionable silence. Zyl sat down at the table, picked up a cup of tea, and drank it alongside Mercury. He'd gaze out of the window, or at the ceiling, or simply at the mopaaw.

It was almost a little strange to see him act so... normally, now. Mercury had him seen as a full dragon, the size of multiple buildings. Claws so large he could smash down castles. And yet, here he was, sitting on a regular wooden chair, drinking tea with... with Mercury.

Only in moments like this one did the absurdity of this world really sink in. It didn't follow the same laws as the old one did all the time. Being able to become heavier and lighter via use of an individual, extradimensional space did not make sense, yet it happened. Mana could essentially appear from nowhere.

Everything was so similar, yet so different from his old life. Mercury smiled, and drank some more tea. Despite everything... he liked it here.

The companionable silence stretched on a while longer. Eventually, both of them had finished their drinks, and Mercury got up to do the dishes. A whole cacophany of plates floated into the air next to him, held up by dozens of ghostly hands. With a swift, graceless hop, he made it onto the kitchen counter, stumbled, then caught himself.

"Need more time to get used to it?" Zyl asked.

That was the first comment he'd made on Mercury's missing leg. In truth, the mopaaw was glad. He could tell that there was something there that made him feel incomplete. The stumbling felt a little embarrassing. But Zyl had not asked yet. And Mercury appreciated that a whole lot.

"Yeah, I think so," the mopaaw replied. "It should grow back. Hopefully."

Zyl nodded. "It should. Your vitality is... what, one-eighty?"

"Two hundred," Mercury replied.

The dragon nodded, scratching his chin. "Yeah. With that, and your regeneration Skills... it should grow back throughout the next season."

Zyl didn't know the exact details of Mercury's Skills, but the fact that he regenerated remarkably quickly was pretty clear. So that was not a particularly large leap of logic. "Throughout the season, huh?"

"I'm glad you have that item. Constantly getting a prosthetic refitted would be rather time consuming." Also expensive, but Zyl didn't care about the money. "Plus, whenever it wasn't freshly adapted, it would fit wrong, and when it was, it wouldn't be broken in. Just trouble."

Mercury smiled. "Yeah, me too. It's handy." He was also glad to use the item for something other than bloodshed. Having something that was only meant to hurt others... it didn't sit quite right with him.

Then, silence hung for a bit again, as Mercury let water wash over the plates, using <Force of the Hecatoncheires> to scrub at any dirt. One by one, he placed the plates on the drying rack.

"What's next?" Zyl eventually asked, quietly.

"Hm?" Mercury hummed.

"What's next, Mercury. Will you be going back to the fae realm? Will something come at us again?"

Mercury smiled. "Yes, and yes, to both." He shook his head wistfully. "This is a dangerous world, Zyl. You know this."

“... yeah.”

“So, yes, there will be danger again. But, as for what’s next... well, I’d like to go on a date with you, or something. Go shopping or to a library. Eat some ice cream. Then, I’ll pick something back up. Still got a lot to learn... and a lot more nails to make if you ask Yasashiku.” Mercury rolled his eyes, and Zyl smiled a little.

“So, yeah. I can’t tell you what the next ‘big thing’ will be. I know you wanna protect me from it all, but I don’t want to hide away from the world. I don’t wanna hole up as a sage in a flying fortress or anything like that. I want to live, Zyl. Go places, see places, and interact with it all. That’s what I think life is all about.”

He said it so sincerely that the dragon didn’t reply for a moment. Zyl took a minute to collect himself. Breathe deeply. “When I can, I will come along,” he said. “And when I can’t, you’ll come back, right?”

Mercury smiled, hopped down from the counter, pranced over to Zyl, then hopped onto his lap, and tapped his nose with a paw. “Aren’t you a big worrywart. Of course I’ll come back.”

Zyl smiled. “Thank you. I don’t wanna chain you down, Mercury. I love you. I support your adventures. I think your pure desire to live is charming, and I do not wanna stifle it.”

“I appreciate it, Zyl,” Mercury said with a smile. “I’ll always come back, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Wanna go for some ice cream?”

“Yeah,” the dragon said with a smile.