

Chapter 236: Necessity

CW: The second part of this chapter (after the six dashes) contains descriptions of gore. Viewer discretion is advised.

As one might expect, the beds in the cottage were criminally soft.

By now, Mercury could sleep just fine on almost anything. Dirt, grass, wood, stone, it made very little difference. His skin was tough enough, and <Hydration> would just keep adapting while he slept, until it was harder than the material he laid upon.

But he could still appreciate a good bed when he found one. And Sera had some dang good beds. Were they there to lull people in a sense of security and comfort? Yes. But the best traps were those that made you wanna come back, so there was no threat.

Mercury laid down on the criminally soft sheets. He felt... fine. His mind had already mostly recovered from his recent surgery. In fact, it had grown stronger again. Sure, helping the courts still took everything he had, but it no longer really pushed his limits the same way it used to.

And what a strange thought that was. Altering the core nature of a being, by now, had become routine. He smiled at the thought, pulling the Blanket of Dreams out from within his log.

Despite their incredible softness, the blankets here still didn't measure up to that one. It was simply too comfortable, no questions asked. Covered by a soft veil, and with the noise and importance of the outside world fading, Mercury fell asleep.

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Soft, green grass. A fountain to the south, a citadel of fire to the north. Dark mountains to the east, and a castle of glass to the west, all under a patchwork sky and two silver suns.

Mercury awoke in his dreams. The realm had grown so much larger, filled with an evergrowing garden. Flowers, trees, fields of berries and vegetables. And, of course, the parts of the prismatic jungle he stole from Joy, and the entire world he'd taken from Yearning, landmarks cast in an amber hue.

It was different, yet still the same. The people living here, too, were as always. Kim, his gardener, and Whisperstar, who might be something of a guardian. How amusing that was, he thought.

And, finally, near Mercury's astral body, there was old Uunrahzil. Ancient, endlessly vast, woven from a tapestry of <Mana Veins> that Mercury still hardly understood. He could now

peer past it, seeing their true shape if he really wanted, seeing starlight and nebulae and wondrous lights, but he didn't.

Instead, he chose to see this ancient creature as they presented themselves. As a friend, as a benefactor. 'Hello, old Uunrahzil'

'Young Mercury,' they hummed. 'It has been some time, has it not? I am glad to see you seem to be doing well.'

He twisted his astral form into a warm smile. 'So am I. You seem stable.'

'As your mind grows, my form solidifies,' old Uunrahzil thought. 'This one is a little less fractured. A million shards reduced to a myriad. And your mind has become formidable.' Beneath that, Mercury read joy at his achievements.

'So it seems,' he replied. 'Remaking the courts is taking time and effort, but it is also rewarding. It pushes me.'

Uunrahzil gave him a long look. 'But you seem to want more.'

At that, Mercury's smile turned a little crooked. 'It is challenging. But it mainly stretches my understanding, my ihn'ar. I feel closer to the third veil than ever before, but it no longer truly pushes the limits of my mind. Not without additional challenges.'

'Then impose them on yourself, no?' Uunrahzil asked.

Mercury shook his head, softly. 'That would be unfair. I might do a sloppy job or take longer than needed, and it could result in a worse outcome for the fae who trust me to do my job.'

His old mentor gave another non-committal hum. 'A reasonable concern. Then, if your mind can take more, perhaps there is more time to spend on practice?'

'Perhaps,' Mercury thought. He could probably stand to train a little more again, now that the fae realm was stabilizing. Then again, there was a constant risk of things blowing up. Ah, Dreamweaver did not know about what he did to Oberon, did they? He should mention that. 'Uunrahzil. I have changed the nature of the courts as you know, yes?'

Dreamweaver nodded. 'So you tell me.'

'Well. One of the courts, Oberon of Mellow, was rather displeased with that. He seems prideful and conceited, unable to bear with any change to "his realm". So, he tried to bring me to heel, over and over.'

'That does sound like him,' Uunrahzil agreed.

'Well. I exacerbated things, too. You may know that I am not exactly the most respectful. I refused to bow to him, not even my head. And so, things spiralled, until he attempted to make me part of his court as a slave, basically.'

Uunrahzil's features twisted into displeasure at that. 'The fae should know better than to try and tame a weaver.'

'He paid,' Mercury thought at the ancient one. 'He paid dearly. I changed him, too. Made it so that he knows I will never bow to him. He cannot even think otherwise anymore, cannot even conceptualise my subservience.'

'Harsh,' Uunrahzil replied after a few moments. 'But not unexpected. If you put your hand in a flame, you expect to get burnt.'

Mercury gave them a long look. 'Have you ever done something akin to this?'

'Yes,' Dreamweaver replied. There was no hesitation, though Mercury did read a bit of underlying shame. 'Not just one. I have changed people against their will. Self-destructive ones. People who were harming others. And people who wanted to harm me. Not too many. Maybe a dozen, in all. But the shame still stings. And yet, I would do it again.'

For a while, the both of them were silent. Listening to the wind brush the grass. The way the sky clouded over, and faint raindrops began to fall. Eventually, Mercury had another question. 'Is it worse to kill someone or to change them?'

Uunrahzil drew in a deep <Breath>. 'There is no answer to that. No simple yes or no. Sometimes, killing someone is more merciful. Sometimes, changing someone is. People can lose themselves, and sometimes it is our duty to help them find themselves again.'

'I see,' Mercury said. He looked up at the sky. Had he helped Oberon find himself? No. But what if, say, one of his friends were suffering? Would it be fair to change them without permission? Would they ever agree? Mercury felt that the thought was terrifying.

'Most people,' Uunrahzil interrupted, 'are much more solid than the fae. I tell you this, because generally, you will not be able to meddle as much. A creature's essence isn't often malleable. We can force changes, but they will cause internal conflict. Sometimes, that is needed. Often, it is harmful.'

Mercury found himself with a question. With this, could he change whether he was gay? He wouldn't, of course. What a disgusting thought. But would his past self have been the same?

As a kid, when his parents started hating him for it. Would he have wanted that? Taken that way out?

Knowing that the answer wasn't a clear and absolute "no" disgusted him. Kindness was such a short commodity, and the fact that it could be withdrawn based on gender or sexuality disgusted him, too. People were so cruel so easily.

Things were a little better in that regard here, on Chronagen. He'd not been insulted for his choice of partner once. People were probably a little more open, given the fact that the system and its levels kind of promoted people to follow their desires, and be different from one another.

He kind of doubted that there was anyone with the exact same set of Skills. Not even a clone would have those. After all, their desires would be different, simply based on the fact that they were a clone.

Mercury took a deep breath. The way people ticked, and changing those things, was terrifying. In some ways, it was helpful. Recognized as <Medicine> by the system. But, in other ways, it was the most cruel and invasive thing he could do.

There was a decision to be made here. He wanted to decide on some kind of solid stance, of when he was alright with altering someone and when he wouldn't. A few rules that he could abide by.

First, changes that went against an individual's desires were, generally, gross. This was, basically, a rule of consent. People in distress couldn't consent properly, especially when there was external pressure. In the same way, he might have wanted to have his gayness taken away because of his parents. That was a cruel change, because it was making someone's nature conform to someone else's standards.

This had the additional benefit that when trans people decided to transition, he would be comfortable helping and encouraging, even if external factors pushed them to do otherwise.

Second, changes that were necessary would generally be more acceptable. Changing Yearning, for example, was both for its own safety, and that of others. Its nature had caused people harm, had caused itself harm, and thus needed to change. Was it in a position to agree to that change? Not at all.

But in the same way that Mercury felt comfortable taking away a murderer's desire to murder, he felt comfortable taking away Yearning's desire to own everything.

If he changed someone, it should reduce their harm to themselves and the people around them.

Third, any change that he made would be as small as possible, and as big as required. Seifes had not needed too much, Sibori had needed to be built back up from the ground. Mercury did not want to alter a person so completely they could no longer recognize their past selves.

People changed all the time. Who he was right now would, eventually, be a shadow cast on a wall. Most people had decisions they regretted, and decisions they approved of, but they could still see that those were decisions they had made. Even the terrible ones.

Mercury wanted to keep his changes to a point where Seifes could look at what they'd done as the ruler of Truth and regret it, but still understand it.

He took a deep breath. 'There,' he thought. 'Three rules. Consent, necessity, low invasiveness.'

'Those seem like sensible principles,' Unnrahzil replied. 'They are not absolute, of course.'

'They aren't,' Mercury agreed. 'But they can tell me when something is fair. What I did to Oberon still disgusts me. It was violating and cruel and it was what I saw as my best option,' he thought.

Uunrahzil smiled faintly. They radiated a faint happiness, pleased with the way Mercury had worked through things himself. 'So it would seem.'

'What is the change you most regret making in someone else?' Mercury asked.

They turned silent. A long moment passed between the two of them. 'It is a rather sad story,' they said.

'I would hear it,' Mercury replied.

More seconds passed. An age-old sigh. 'Fine, then. It was when I took apart my own pain.'

Mercury didn't interrupt. He just waited. Old Uunrahzil turned towards the patchwork sky, staring at it for another long few seconds before they spoke. 'I am not one to wallow,' they thought out loud. 'But I have known loss. I have, once, put down one of mine tri'ht.

'They were reckless. Hasty. They went too far in their weaving, in their experimentation, and wantonly dove into other minds. It changed them, until they were barely themselves anymore. They grafted others' understandings onto their being.

'Then, they tore open our sanctuary. Took in mortals from the waking world, and experimented on them, too. It was such a swift descent, and they hid it so well, but they were found. By then, the student I had taken in was gone. It was a chimeric abomination, designed to break.

'And it was my failure. A failure to temper expectations of power. My responsibility to clean up.

'I killed them.'

For a long, long moment, the words hung in the air.

'I killed them,' old Dreamweaver repeated, firm but weary. 'There was nothing else to do. No amount of grafting or reshaping could have undone the damage that was already there. I choked the life out of my student with my own mind.

'Watched as they died. As their existence was unmade. String by string, mote by mote, disintegrated. And it hurt. So very, very much.

'So I choked that to death, too. Erased my hurt, took that part of my being and simply picked it out. Tossed it to the wind. And, Yr'enzel, I mean this sincerely. There is no shame in discarding pain. There is no shame in it, at all. It can be necessary, so very necessary. But this time it was not.

'I took away my own grief. We never got to mourn. Never got to simply hurt. It never went from piercing to a dull ache, never to a distant scar. It was simply wiped away, forgotten and gone. But it added to the horror.

'We killed someone dear, so very dear to us. A precious tri'ht. And all we remember is the way their light left their eyes, coldly. All we remember is the horror of it, the terror, their fear, their pain. We remember being a monster, Mercury.'

Mercury took a long moment to answer. 'That's... horrible,' he said.

'Yes. It was cruel. To ourselves, and to their memory. And it's never coming back. That is the danger of altering oneself. There is no return, no simple way to return a thread to its place, because it will be forgotten by the only person to see it,' Uunrahzil explained. 'And thus, we regret that one most.'

The mopaaw nodded. 'I understand,' he thought.

'This one is glad,' Uunrahzil replied. 'Because I would really rather not have to tell it again.'

Mercury found himself with an awkward smile. 'I understand. Yes, that was rather enough worrying for this night, wasn't it? Instead, perhaps, I should practice my weaving some more.'

At that, despite everything, Dreamweaver seemed a little pleased. 'Never enough practice for you, is there? An amicable quality. Let us get to it, then.'

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A little later, Mercury woke back up in the soft bed. All three of his zeyjn were well rested, and he felt prepared to tackle a new day.

Calmly and smoothly, he pushed open the door to his room. Seifes was already up, sitting at the desk, playing a game of cards with Miryum. Mercury didn't recognize any of the cards, but it surely was some kind of game, in which Seifes seemed to be absolute trouncing the other ruler.

"Seems I win again," they said, a sly tone to their voice. "That means you owe me yet another cookie."

"Yes, yes." Miryum waved them off. "Just wait until Sera returns."

Mercury hopped onto a chair meant for him - high enough to let him see over the table easily. "Oh? Are they not here?"

"Sera is currently... hunting," Miryum said. "Our laughter yesterday whet their appetite and they weren't quite left satisfied. So..."

Before the ruler finished, the door to the cottage slammed open. "Bear witness!" Sera announced to a hoarde of school children, "the cookie empire!"

Within moments, the table found itself full of plates, filled with lovely baked delights. The children descended like a horde of hungry wolves, and Seifes only barely managed to steal a few plates, carrying them with their hands while yet more hands shoved the pastries into their mask.

Mercury scrambled for distance from the dozens of grabby hands of the kids. A few of them detected him nonetheless, and instantly dove to pet him, until he vanished from their world by cloaking himself with <Veil>.

"Well," Miryum said. "I really should have seen this coming."

"You should," Sera said cherrily. "Now, hurry on into some other room. I don't want Seifes scaring the little ones."

"Me, scary?" they asked, honestly shook.

Sera gestured vaguely at them. "The arms," they said.

"Ah, right," the ruler of Honesty replied. They gave a short sigh, then opened one of the doors out of the kitchen, into a living room with a crackling fire. Mercury enjoyed it for a little while, until Orin and Alice, too, showed up.

Then, he said those dreaded words. "Let us move on."

No one complained. They all knew it had to happen, really. There was no way they were staying in Affection any longer than necessary. And Mercury's <Intuition> was ringing gentle warning bells, so they left.

Back into the carriage, travelling across cotton candy fields, and outskirts, heading for the next court to tackle. Blood.

Why Blood? Because Mercury wanted to. It would be easier to do so now, to head to Tor-Tern before more people came to harm. So, Mercury travelled to the court of Blood.

The journey was quiet and uneventful. So was their arrival. Frankly, it was almost bizarrely fast that they were brought before the ruler.

Mercury was greeted by the ancient one of Blood. A faceless avatar of tall wood, wreathed in thorns, and dripping crimson sap. "Welcome," they said, their blank slate of a face unmoving, "to our crimson banquet."

And that was when Mercury's warning bells really started ringing. They walked into the ancient one, a humongous tree, mostly consisting of a thorny trunk, and a dark, looming canopy.

Within the tree, there were a few fae of blood arranged, most notably, Tor-Tern on a crimson throne. It was made from shiny crimson, interspersed with bones. There were dozens upon dozens of long tables, covering most of the hall that they found themselves in, each one covered with a white cloth, veiling the feast hidden beneath.

“Ah, Mercury,” Tor-Tern said. “What a pleasure for you to finally come by. I have been awaiting this moment.”

“Have you? I did not expect that,” Mercury noted.

Three heads, each turned into a sneer. “Oh, I have. I have been preparing a feast for you, after all. Abiding by our bet, of course. No one was put into a position to be hurt by me. No one was harmed directly. Anyone who asked was returned to their world. I have been in the business of giving out blessings, frankly, Mercury,” they claimed.

“Blessings?” he asked.

“Oh, yes. Blessings of Blood. To those deserving among the mortals. To those who win our favour. To those who fight, tooth and nail, to survive,” they said. The sneer grew wider. “Look upon it, and see what our blessings have reaped!”

In one swift motion, the tables were unveiled. White linen pulled aside to reveal a morbid, horrible tapestry.

Body parts.

Upon each and every one of the dozen tables laid dismember bits of bodies. Twitching fingers, torn-open rib cages, intestines laid sprawling across the entirety of the tables. Severed heads, eyes unblinkingly staring at Mercury.

“Come now,” Tor-Tern said. “Feast your eyes first, and then eat! Our esteemed visitor deserves nothing other than Blood’s finest.”

Some of the body pieces belonged to wild animals. Some to humans, some to sipisc, some to orcs or dwarves or elves or true kin. And some were from children.

Tor-Tern had given their blessings to killers. Encouraged them to murder, or enabled them. No one had been abducted by them, of course, so they weren’t put into a bad position. They simply enabled wanton slaughter back in the human realm, through the gaps.

Mercury’s rules had been simple. Don’t harm anyone. Don’t put anyone in a position to be harmed. Return those who wish it back to their world.

Nowhere did he mention limits on simply blessing others. And the fae, as they were prone to, had exploited this, leaving a macabre feast of dripping blood and horrible death before Mercury.

Seifes veil had a frown on it, the sunlight dim and gloomy. Alice and Orin looked on in horror. This wasn’t unexpected, but it was still tragic.

And Mercury... he looked at Tor-Tern. “This is your welcome?” he asked, calmly, with a dangerous edge to his voice.

“Would you like to see more? I can prepare as much as you like, Yr’enzel. Outsider. Rulebreaker. Unshackled.” They spat the words with disdain.

Mercury took a deep <Breath>. The air smelled of festering blood. Of disease. Of death and maggots crawling through rotting flesh. It smelled of brutality and war and sweat and tears and murder.

All of it settled upon Mercury with the horrid weight of responsibility, all of it sank of the bottom of the <Still Mirror> at the center of his soul. And he deactivated the Skill.

Hatred.

"I have been so patient with you all," he said. His blood felt icy in his veins, each beat of his heart *hurt*. "I have been so kind and affirmative. I have helped you wherever I could, tried to give this realm a shot. Look at yourself. You pathetic piece of shit. You're dragging your own name through the mud, ruining your court. Are you blind? You're no ruler of Blood. You're a ruler of Murder."

The word slammed into the fae realm, and it was recognized as true. The court of Blood broke, shattered, was replaced with Murder. When Silence became Secrets, when Secrets became Loneliness, in that same vein, Blood turned into Murder.

And Tor-Tern laughed. "So **what?! Who cares!** Their lives are worthless, Mercury! Toys. They would die, anyway. I could blink and they would perish, each and every last one of these worms! What are mortals in the face of eternity?!"

Mercury took another <Breath>, and the storm brewed around him. His minds spun into gear, wind howling through the halls of Murder. A veil of gold shattered before Mercury's will, and one of iridescence broke, too.

[The individual has acquired the ability <Grief (lowest)> through a specific action!]

A dozen, a hundred, a thousand tragedies flowed into Mercury, fuelling his understanding. Lowest? He looked at that designation with disdain. No, he *knew* grief. He had gone through it so much, so, so very fucking much.

His parents, when they kicked him out, and they died to him. His uncle Norm, when he died in a car crash, one of the few family members who supported him. His friends, back when he was human, and his friends in the new world. And now? This. He knew more grief than that.

[Your understanding of <Grief> has increased! <Grief (lowest) -> (medium)>]

"Titania!!" Mercury roared, and the smell of rot intensified. A storm of leaves, and the faerie queen appeared.

"Mercury," she said. "I am not at your beck and ca-"

She looked at him, into his eyes, and flinched. Mercury looked back at her.

"Necessity," he said. "This court of Murder? I will change it."

A moment passed. She looked at the macabre spectacle. Then, slowly, she closed her eyes. "If it must be done, then do it."

More smells. Of dry leaves, of coming cold. Oberon. "This easily?!" the king demanded. "You would simply let this creature, this beast call upon you, and demand one of ours, and you would give them up?"

Oberon grabbed onto Titania's shoulder, digging his claws into her flesh, her very bones creaking as green blood that smelled of roses fell to the floor. "You're pathetic. A coward. Crush this creature already!!"

Titania looked at him, mourning in her blazing eyes. Ozone overtook rot. "Stand. Down. Oberon. Are you so blind you would not see the cracks? Their throne will break."

"Because of him!" Oberon yelled. "Because of his demands forcing our hand! We are made to *deceive*, Titania! Who would ever, in their right mind, give a fae rules and expect them to obey the *spirit* of the agreement?!"

Mercury ignored the pathetic wretch. He stepped forwards at Tor-Tern of Murder. The veils shattered. The storm brushed in through the door. <Rain fell>. A <Dream Manifested>.

Insidiously, the world changed. Murder was blood and bits of corpses, but it was flawed. Too-cruel, too-feared. A silver crown wove itself on Mercury's face, and a sinister metal wrapped around his claws. He smelled of nightmares and silence.

Through the cracks in the court, amber bled. It demanded silence from this world, the neutering stopping, the footsteps no longer ringing out as grass grew. Rain and grass, endless, sprawling fields, and landmarks frozen in time.

A dream snuck through the gaps, then crashed into the court of Murder. The ancient one vanished, and the tables of horrid things now stood upon endless fields. Tor-Tern's throne vanished from beneath them, leaving the blood-hydra hanging in the air.

"You want to kill the ruler of Murder?!" they demanded. "Come, and die trying!"

Mercury wove air into his lungs. He grieved. With a look at Seifes, Alice and Orin, he made a simple request. "If more fae rulers come here, keep them off my back, please."

Honesty nodded, wearing a sad smile. "Of course," Seifes said.

"I will do my best," Alice said.

Orin gave a shaky nod. "... Okay."

Mercury straightened his back, rolled his shoulders, and stepped closer towards Murder. He let his emotions flow unrestrained. No <Clarity>, no <Still Mirror>. Just an endless storm, battering against the ruler's frame. Raindrops tearing pinprick holes into them.

"Yes! Try to kill us as we try to kill you, Mercury!" Tor-Tern gloated. "It'll be a spectacle of blood and guts!"

"You're so noisy," Mercury said. The amber, sneaking along the grass seemed to agree. <Grief> wove into it, turning its colour a little more dull, a little less vibrant. The amber

became thick, heavy, and horribly poisonous. It snuck through the grass like liquid metal.
“Shut up already.”

A spear of silver dove from the ground, straight through Tor-Tern’s central head, and the carnage began.