

Chapter 226: Shackles Unshackled

"You will not touch my friend."

Mercury stared at Oberon, entirely uncaring. He faced the storm calmly, staring at the faerie King.

He smelled of Ozone. Of thunder in the air. Of wrath, ready to crash down - or already doing so.

The faerie king snarled at Mercury. Behind his calm mask, he was bared teeth and bestial fury. "You've gone too far. This ends, now."

Slowly, Mercury tilted his head. "It does?"

Oberon's mask cracked, a wide split showing off pearly teeth, twisted into a grin. "Yeah. Done. You've broken the rules, Mercury."

"I have?" he asked.

"You've eaten fae food. You've stolen fae property. You've brought metal into the fae realm - whole and hearthy, not rusted. You've stepped into a faerie ring," he said, smugly. Mercury looked down, and indeed, there was a circle of leaves and twigs beneath him. "So, beast. The rules say... that you're *mine*."

Mercury looked at him. Oberon, seemingly, exploded into shackles. Twisted, gnarled wood. Circular, abominable things that lashed out at Mercury, clicking shut around him. One snapped shut around his neck, and four more around his legs.

They were heavy. Horribly heavy, to the point where Mercury thought he was chained down by steel weights. They were also hot, burning against his skin. He felt his fur start to burn as searing marks tried to emboss themselves on him.

"Suck my dick, Oberon," Mercury said. Within a moment, the shackles grew heavier. He'd broken another rule, being too disrespectful of the fae. But he was really, fully, out of fucks to give. "I tried really, really hard to play nice. To play by fae rule. Not once - not even a single time! - did I force you to play by my rules. Fuck that."

"Titania. My conditions have changed," he said. "I want to be exempt from the rules of the fae courts. No one can ever own me. Ever. Agree or I start breaking things."

Was it blackmail? Yes. Absolutely. He was no longer leveraging favours or making alliances, or just posturing his value. It was a very simple proposition. She had a choice to make: Oberon, or the continued existence of the fae realm.

More leaves swirled. Mercury felt his skin start to tingle, the heat fighting against <Hydration>, rapidly adapting him. He cast <Shift>, turning his skin into something far more heat resistant, though he didn't quite pay attention to what that was.

Instead, he focused on the room, on what changed. The way the shackles slowly leached his capacity to think. Ah, but his mind was made from sterner stuff than that. Oberon would not take it for hours yet.

But still, he felt that grating erosion of his will, the way that the shackles would seek to break him. Mercury felt disgusted with them, and every moment that passed, his <Truth> roiled against it. Really, this made for good mastery grinding he felt, even if the feeling he got from it was disgusting.

Then, finally, the world twisted again, and Titania stood in front of him, eyes blazing. "Oberon! What are you doing?!" she demanded, words impacting the air with force.

"Disciplining a base creature," the faerie king replied through gritted teeth.

"Stop!" she screamed.

"Never."

Mercury smirked. He was feeling mischievous... the faerie king had kinda pissed him off now. So, he *yawned*. "Haaaaaaah. Y'know. I might start getting annoyed anytime now. Gonna start hacking pieces off your precious realm."

"*Oberon!!*" Titania yelled.

Instead, the king yanked on the shackles, aiming to pull Mercury to the ground. The mopaaw lurched, of course, but remained standing on platforms of invisible force. He would *not* kneel. Not to this bastard. Not ever.

"Do you not see, Titania? He is playing you like a fiddle. You are doing this creature's bidding! Where is your honour?! Your pride?!" he demanded, stomping on the floor. The wood cracked beneath his boots.

"My pride?" she asked. "It is active, Oberon. I simply know my limits! Are you unwilling to look?! This needless posturing has turned you into a danger to all of us!"

Mercury let his eyes pass between the two of them. The scratching against his mind was growing stronger, and he found himself becoming more irritable for it. He strained against the chains.

Oberon was still pulling on them, but Mercury refused to move. He encased himself in a box of his *rijn*, a solid mental lock on moving forward. Instead, the chains pulled and threatened to crush him against the invisible wall. But if his body was to splatter into a thousand pieces, so be it.

"You disgust me," Oberon spat. "You bow to lowlives, now. See how far we've fallen. It's pathetic. You bring shame upon all our lives."

"Titania. I want my freedom. *Now*," Mercury demanded.

The faerie queen growled at Oberon, then spun and looked at Mercury. "I cannot give this," she said. "Not because I do not wish to, but because I *cannot*."

"You would consider him?!" Oberon asked.

With disgust, Titania flicked out a hand, slamming him backwards through the wall. Somehow, the chains accompanied him, elongating. The scraping against Mercury's mind eased off.

"Call the other rulers, then," Mercury asked.

"It will take time," she said.

For a moment, he considered snapping at her. Then, he took a deep breath. And decided to be patient, as much as he could. "That's fine," he said. "I can't promise as long as you need, though."

"I understand," she replied, biting her lip. "He placed faerie shackles on you. I didn't expect-"

"You'll have to understand that what you expected matters stunningly little to me right now," Mercury said with a huff. "I will hurt Oberon. There is simply no longer a way about that."

Titania stared at him. "... How? Not to doubt your capabilities but you barely managed a broken one."

Mercury looked at her. Really, really looked at her. He didn't smile or frown or have any strong expression at all for that matter. "Titania," he said slowly. "I'm going to hurt Oberon."

"That's not an answer, you-"

"I'm going to. Hurt. Oberon."

It was the <Truth>.

Leaning into the Skill, the faerie queen's eyes went wide. She knew he believed what he said. So, even if she doubted him, she could feel his confidence.

Could Mercury take on a ruler, one on one? Someone like Oberon?

No fucking way.

He almost laughed at the thought. No, he could not take Oberon on. The fae had thousands of years on him. But he was also complacent, and complacency was the opposite of what the system was. Desire and drive brought a person forward. And that... Mercury had plenty of it.

"Fine then. Do what you must," Titania replied. "I will try to protect you."

Mercury smiled. He stepped out through the shattered remains of his room, the wall broken open. Outside, a storm was raging. The walls of Nether were cracked, red wood split as red water trickled inside. The floor was slowly filling with crimson liquid, like a sheen of blood.

The water was filthy, too. A disgusting mix of leaves and compost and wet wood laid in it. Tiny, dead insects floated in it, locusts hopping from one dried leaf to another. Oberon was twisted, having forsaken his mask.

White porcelain laid shattered before him, the pieces sunk to the bottom and already staining red. The water bit at Mercury, but he ignored it. His fur smoked from the heat, and the stink of burning hair joined that of decay and stagnation.

Oberon was inhuman.

His frame had expanded, dozens of withered branches reaching from his back. His face was split across the middle, chelicerae spilling forth from one corner of his mouth. His teeth had grown long and jagged, almost needle-like, hanging in an open maw.

Fury was writ across his blazing eyes, burning the air with lightning crackles. "Mortal," he called, voice twisted. "Give back what is mine, or kneel."

Mercury smiled at him. "Zyl?" He asked, plucking at an invisible string and fire spilled forth from beside him.

"Yes, my love?" the dragon asked.

"Could you punch him for me? He deserves it," Mercury said.

Zyl grinned. "I was hoping you'd ask that."

With that, the dragon was off, and Alice came from her room. She, however, seemed less inclined to help. After everything... Alice was still terrified of the fae.

That was fine, too. Mercury didn't need her help for this. Zyl was just there to make sure that Oberon couldn't physically hurt him.

Summoning air in his lungs, Mercury took a deep breath. <Rainfall>. That was part of who he was. And so, rain fell.

Thick rivulets formed, slamming into the blighted water below. The Cloudmatter Shawl turned dark and stormy. Rainwater slid off his Dracoleather Cloak, harmlessly mixing with the foul smelling stuff that now reached to his ankles.

In an instant, Zyl was on top of Oberon. Fire rained down and wood broke with each fist he swung. The buzzing of insectoid wings grew oppressive... but Mercury didn't hear it.

Around him, the rain swallowed all noise. Everything he heard was that quiet pitter-patter. He closed his eyes for a moment, and let his mind wander. Dream, really. A part of him sunk into ihn'ar, and the veils broke into infinite pieces around him.

He opened his eyes and they glittered with starlight. The scratching on his mind was drowned out by the rain. Around him, his <Dream Manifested>. Like a blossoming flower, verdant fields spread out. Crimson water was replaced by sapling trees and lively blossoms.

Mercury triggered <Astral Advent>, and instantly, his mind became more firm. A bastion against change. He was free, and that was the <Truth>. He knew that these shackles, they meant nothing, he was absolutely convinced of the fact.

So, he strode forward.

Oberon may have been the faerie king. He fought Zyl to a standstill, frankly, he could probably have overwhelmed the dragon eventually, but that didn't matter. Mercury was not in the fae realm. He was inside his own dream, where the faerie rules didn't matter.

His fur stopped smoking. His skin no longer burnt. The scratching against his mind was gone, shattered alongside the veils. He knew the shackles were on him, but they meant *nothing* here. They were worthless pieces of deadwood, to be eroded away by the unending, uncaring pitter-patter of the rain.

Mercury stepped forward. Oberon barely knew he was there. <Veil> was insidious like that. The faerie king's attention simply slipped off him. With <Combat Sense> and <Itinerant>, the mopaaw easily strode forward, making his way past shrapnel and bits of fire that rained down.

Behind him, his dream trailed. A spreading, verdant world, uncaring for the red sea. It was banished, and Mercury was sovereign alone. The shackles grew stronger, but he <Perservered> against them, his <Truth> reinforcing his unbreaking will.

And then, finally, he was next to Oberon.

It was kind of funny. Zyl and him were locked in exchanging strikes so fast Mercury could just barely follow them. The two were really powerful. He could be crushed. The fae were amazingly strong casters, and Oberon could frankly summon plagues that would rend Mercury down to his bones in moments.

But none of that mattered.

He spoke, cloaked by <Veil>. Unheard by the faerie king. "Hey, Oberon. I don't kneel. I really need to hammer this home to you. In fact, I'm gonna do something that I think is pretty cruel. I'll brand it into your being. This is gonna hurt."

Then, he <Witnessed> the faerie king.

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Euphoria flooded Oberon's veins.

There was no feeling quite like it. Like claiming something by force, like breaking someone who wronged him. Nothing in this world could quite compare to breaking someone.

A thousand branches descended onto the dragon in front of him, each one tougher than the last. They aimed to ensnare and pierce. Spiders crawled along their surfaces, and soon, each artificial pest was burnt to ash, too.

Fire. His entire world was fire and he laughed.

It was a horrible, chittering sound, like a hive of hornets crawling over each other. It was the sound of a plague, of disease, of parasites eating you from the inside out.

The dragon - Oberon didn't bother to remember its name - was an obstacle, but the mopaaw was already his. No one could break the faerie shackles. No one.

Oh, the creature would try. Oberon knew it'd try, but it'd fail and then it'd be at his feet and he would kick it until all that was left was a bloody, pathetic pulp. Then he would do it each day, until a hundred seasons passed.

Maybe then he would be satisfied.

With a vicious grin on the half of his face that could still support such motions, Oberon reached out and grabbed hold of Zyl's arm. Twigs burrowed through his skin and down to his bones, leaving a dozen bloody holes as they were burnt to ash.

The flamed passed over Oberon, licking at his skin and his hair, but they passed by harmlessly. A force of nature was not so easily touched by flames. What a pathetic display.

A fist smashed into his jaw, cracking one of his chelicerae.

Okay, maybe not that pathetic, then. Oh, how *fun* it would be to break this dragon.

He didn't pay attention. Not to the water, not to the smells, not to the fire. All he needed was devastation. To see his enemies broken like husks at his feet. *That* was what being a fae was all about, after all! To toy with these pathetic mortals. They were barely puppets for his amusement.

Ah. But wasn't there another puppet? One he wanted to see broken so much more? Where had that one gone...

"This is gonna hurt."

Oberon heard the words being said, and they enraged him all over again. He gave in to his emotion, let the wrath consume him. He remembered, now, and saw, now. That cretin, that worthless worm, that insect. He would squash the beast beneath his heel and watch its bones crack and break to powder and then-

A world crashed into him.

It was an experience that was truly impossible to describe. One moment, Oberon was in the fae realm. His realm. Where he was absolute king, a ruler, the mightiest there was. He owned it all. A whole court, a whole realm.

Now? Nothing.

In one fell motion, the rules were flipped on their head. Oberon was stunned to silence. For the first time in his life, he could lie. Oh, he'd deceived alright. But he had always, always told the truth. No more.

The compulsion was gone, a whole world superimposing itself on him. The shackles he'd forgotten about, those that were held in one of his hands, were nothing but heavy chains carved from wood.

Powerless? No, not at all. This world was temporary. It would fade. The fae rules already took hold of him again - before even a single word spilled from his lips he was bound to the truth once more.

But he was not in the fae realm. He was not in his place of power.

And then, he was witnessed.

Oberon felt a raindrop hit his cheek.

Somehow, it smashed through. Right underneath his eye, it went through his skin, and through his bones, and back out the other side of his head. A smooth, cylindrical hole, carved through his face.

The sky opened up to look at him. Patchwork patterns of purple parted and revealed a staring eye. It was cloudy, full of rain. It glinted with starlight. It stared into him, into his deepest secrets, it saw him as he was.

A cruel, wretched, petty ruler of a tiny world who would rather see it all crumble than even a hint of challenge to his authority.

Rain fell. Underneath a silver sun, laying down in grass that felt like iron nails against his skin, Oberon screamed in agony.

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Zyl was in Mercury's inner world, too. He'd seen it before, of course. It was... beautiful. Even more so than the last time he was there. The silver sun loomed large and radiant. A star of hope, and he smiled as he saw it.

The wounds on his arm closed. He looked, and saw Whisperstar in the sky, flitting aside as the clouds roiled. He saw Kim, crawling on the floor, planting seeds. They knew Oberon was there, and they didn't care.

A moment passed, and the dragon laughed. Just for a moment. Then, the sky parted, and he saw a giant eye up there.

He knew it. Of course he did. He stared into those eyes so often, after all.

For a moment, he fell in love with his boyfriend all over again. With that ethereal glow to him, that desire to push forward, that damn stubbornness that let him just move past people trying to kill him. As long as he was free... Zyl smiled. He was so happy Mercury felt free with him.

Then the rain fell, and the faerie king screamed.

It was a horrible noise, as hundreds of water drops tore through his body as if it wasn't there at all. Zyl doubted, though, that the rain was the source of that pain.

Mercury stood next to the screaming fae.

He stood over king Oberon, his eyes wide open, his minds active in that way Zyl had come to know. It was a surgery, except Mercury had forsaken all diligence and kindness.

Oberon was on his operating table, and Mercury used a butcher's cleaver for a scalpel.

Zyl could only watch and guess at what happened. He could read Mercury pretty well these days. And he was surprised. There was no malice in his action.

No fury, no hatred. Oh, Mercury was unhappy with the faerie king alright, but he did not let that guide his hands. Zyl felt his regret, at how he wretchedly inscribed a piece of knowledge on the king.

More screams pierced his ears, somehow seeming to get more intense. The coldness with which the eye from the sky stared down was terrifying.

Mercury had turned knowledge into a weapon. The more he knew about Oberon, with each interaction they shared, the faerie king was handing him another weakness, another weapon to wield. His pride, his anger, his stubbornness, his conservatism, his relentless arrogance... each trait was another piece of the puzzle.

Another bit of glass that Mercury artfully pieced together into a window, staring at the very depths of what Oberon was.

Mercury stared at Oberon's soul and understood barely any of it.

The faerie king made no sense. He was a bundle of contradictions and impossibilities and pathetic stitches placed on different perceptions. It was like trying to make sense of a kaleidoscope, of hundreds of mirror images, refracting and breaking on each other.

Understanding the faerie king felt as pointless as counting the ants in a colony. Oh, Mercury could do it, given enough time, sure. But he really didn't see the point.

Right now, he could understand maybe... a tenth of him. There was a little bit that he got from <Grass> and <Water> and <Wind>, after all. And autumn was a season of storms and <Rainfall>. But all of that just didn't summarize Oberon.

Compared to someone like Ciarski, who was so absorbed in their court it made the two almost impossible to distinguish, Oberon was entirely different. There were a thousand different interpretations of him, collected fragments from an eternity of life.

But, for once, Mercury didn't need to understand. He wasn't trying to give Oberon a new lease on life or to help stabilize his court. No, none of that.

Instead of the diligence and care he took, Mercury carved a message into Oberon. He didn't need to understand - he just used a bit of <Rainfall> and <Nothingness> to carve a truth. Oh, Oberon would feel it. A tiny bit of him would be gone forever.

Such was life, wasn't it? Every choice one makes changes oneself. Who one is at any moment is a shadow cast on a wall. Malleable and ever changing. Oberon had simply made a decision, and now that decision was changing him.

Did it feel cruel? Yes. Did Mercury hate it? Yes. There was no joy in hearing the faerie king scream, but a little vindictive part of him didn't mind it. He embraced that dullness for the few minutes that the operation took, and when he was done, a tiny piece of the faerie king would never be the same.

A grafted truth. It was ugly and mismatched to the rest of Oberon. Unlike his insectoid self of rotten wood and dry leaves, this was like a sphere of crystal clear rainwater. A message, carved into his being like a mirror image of clouds caught in a clean puddle.

Mercury stepped away.

The eye in the sky closed. His <Astral Advent> ended, his skin shifted back to skin where the shackles touched. One by one, Mercury deactivated his skills. He slipped out of ihn'ar and the world snapped back into place.

After taking a few steps back, Mercury took a deep breath. The water tried to rust his legs, so he maintained a thin sheet of <Rainfall> over his skin.

Oberon laid on the floor. He had stopped screaming, and his body was left fizzling and crackling as his bones failed to hold their shape. He writhed on the ground and it made shivers run across Mercury's skin.

Briefly, the mopaaw felt bad, but then he saw that the shackles were still on him, and that Obeorn still held onto them. The scratching against his mind came back... and he decided that he really didn't feel all that bad.

Alice and Titania stared. The first with largely surprise, and the second with a bit of abject horror.

"How..." the faerie queen gasped. The glow in her eyes was soft now, having lost some lustre.

"I hurt him," Mercury said in a single breath. "Oberon!" he yelled. "What do you know about me?"

The faerie king snapped his head towards Mercury. A screech left his mouth, shrill and high pitch, but empty and hollow. "You! *You!* I know you will never kneel before me!"

He spat the words with fury, then stopped. That... wasn't what he'd meant to say. "You're-

The word "pathetic" stopped dead in his throat. He couldn't say it. The fae couldn't lie, and he knew Mercury wasn't pathetic.

"You're-

Again, not a sound left his mouth. He wanted to spit, to call the mopaaw a toy, a mortal, a fragile, terrible thing that he would play with and discard when he was done. But he couldn't. Because it *wasn't true*.

Oberon looked within himself and found an answer. "You'll never kneel before me," he gasped. "You'll- You'll- never. How- What?" Oberon put his hands to his face. "You will- I will make you- Raaaaaagh!!!"

Furiously, the faerie king slammed his fist against the wood, spreading new cracks across the guest room. He continued stammering and screaming, but he always said the same thing.

"You will never kneel before me," he ground out through gritted teeth, anger writ on his face.

Mercury, for his part, just nodded.

"Yeah," he said. "I'll never kneel before you. I'll never break. I'll never be your toy. I'll never be your subject. And you? You'll never forget that."

Really, the message was simple. Frankly, if Mercury had try to change, say, Avery with this in mind, he imagined it wouldn't be hard at all. He'd be surprised if it even hurt the guild master in the slightest. He had no desire to see Mercury broken. Avery knew it wouldn't happen.

But for someone like Oberon? It went entirely against his being, his core character. Everything was meant for him, or so he thought. And so, it hurt, because that foundational conception of ownership was cracked and partially broken, now.

Titania slowly dragged her eyes away from Oberon and to Mercury. "This... you broke him."

"Oh, no, no," Mercury said. "I damaged a tiny part of him. Titania, you know yourself that actions have consequences. Oberon tried to trounce on me for the third time. So, I set consequences. I hurt him."

Alice looked at Mercury. She simply stared, unspeaking. Titania frowned. "You went too far."

Mercury turned to her, and looked at her. "Titania. Listen to me, because I will not repeat this. I am a kind person. I want to make the fae realm livable. I am *not* a tool. I'm not some kind of resource, not some kind of value proposition. You don't get to just pick and choose what I do. My reaction was, and I mean this so genuinely, barely appropriate. If I were a fae, I would have done so, so much worse."

She flinched slightly. With a nod, Mercury continued. "So, let's not act like this was too much. Let's not. Things will proceed very simply from now on, alright? You, and the other rulers, are going to take these shackles off me. This isn't a request. These shackles are a very direct declaration that the entire fae realm intends to go to war with me."

Alice looked at Titania, finally dragging her eyes off Mercury. "You should take them off."

The faerie queen frowned. "The other rulers are here, now," she eventually said, and indeed, with a horrible wrenching noise, ten more people stepped in.

Skye's ruler, a form of clouds and arms of arcing lightning. Salt's ruler, a centipede-like monstrosity of the deep ocean. Zanyr of Chill, translucent wings and rings of ice. Ciarski of Shadow, an unknowable curtain of eyes darkness. Rust, an automaton of red metal. Illusion's ruler, a wispy, faint presence. Finva of Dust, a storm of ash ever changing. Scorch's ruler, white hot sphere atop an angelic frame. Tor-Tern of Blood, a three headed draconic creature made from crimson liquid. And Allure, an incarnation of false beauty.

And, of course, little Uldyrel of Appreciation, an unformed bit of potential.

"Great," Mercury said. "Take the shackles off."

The demand rippled through the rulers, and instantly, pressure descended. As if to make him bend. For a moment, the shackles ground against his mind even more, and Mercury felt a sliver of desire to just... let it be and listen to them. He squashed it.

Once more, the air changed. This time, it grew softer. Those on his side were making their voices heard. Mercury considered, then, that he'd probably never have waged war on the whole fae realm. Just about half of it. He almost laughed. How silly that thought was.

"I will make this quick," Titania said. "All in favour that Mercury should be exempt from the shackles of the fae rules, raise your affirmation."

Without hesitation, four votes came in his favour. Ciarski of Shadow, queen Titania herself, Finva of Dust and Uldyrel of Appreciation.

"You cannot be serious," Tor-Tern growled.

"Silence," Titania commanded. "Simply cast your vote."

"Against," the ruler of Blood spat.

The same followed from Scorch, then Allure and Illusion, too. Four against four.

"In favour," Zanyr of Chill confirmed. Their court had been amicable to Mercury, and seemed to continue that streak. Perhaps because he was friends with Arber, perhaps because they feared the Void as its guardians.

"Against," Oberon ground out, finally managing to raise himself up from the puddle of red water he'd laid in.

Skye and Salt hesitated for a moment, then confirmed their choice. "We abstain."

And so, it fell to Rust. The court Mercury was in, the ruler he had been waiting for. Rust would make the choice.

Around itself, the ruler saw the house of its court. Broken and cracked. The ancient tree, injured by none other than Oberon. Rust looked at Ciarski and the way they had changed. No longer weak or crumbling, but instead a solid force. Rust... wanted that.

"In favour," the machine called, and with that, the decision was made.

Six votes for Mercury's freedom. Two abstaining. Five against.

The shackles lifted. Wood split and cracked open, the chains around Mercury breaking.

Tor-Tern of Blood boiled. "Inacceptable," all three heads called. The smell of iron in the air increased a hundredfold, and the crimson water was replaced with true blood coating the floor. "We will fight this, if we must."