

Chapter 220: Shadows

Mercury faintly nodded at the fae welcoming him. He was curious to see how long his stay in this place would be. How long would it take him to find out Shadow's real name? Would he reshape things here, or just help them rediscover themselves?

What a fun little thought.

"It is a pleasure to meet another one of you," Mercury said to the ancient tree spirit, then he turned to the serpent. "And we meet again."

"So we do," the young guardian against the void spoke. The shadows around the serpent writhed in a mix of respect and disdain. Did it still hold a grudge against him for winning the contest? Perhaps for mastering their perspective so quickly?

"Would you show me inside?" Mercury requested.

The ebony avatar shook its head. "No," it spoke, in a deep voice. "Not yet." the ashen mannequin, wreathed in ebony darkness, crossed its arms. "Before we go in, I want you to show me. What is my name?"

Mercury looked at the ashen manifestation, looked really closely, and smirked. She was rather feisty. His eyes trailed from the broad shouldered mannequin down underneath, where tendrils of darkness mixed with growing wood. "Going so far as to hide your true avatar. Is this some kind of test?"

"So what if it is?" the words came out confrontational, but he heard the whisper on the drooping willow branches. It was a spirited and vivid message, meant to be teasing.

"Then I would ask you to show yourself properly," Mercury said, focussing even more. Almost by itself, he pierced the veils, slipping into *ihn'ar* as naturally as he breathed. "Or don't. I can see you down there, too, *Omoria*."

As with Arber, the name spilled forth naturally, as Mercury found the spirit of the tree. She had buried herself deep, wreathed in shadows, but those themselves were a giveaway when he could weave and sense them.

When he called out to her, the spirit snickered, the tall ashen manifestation that had barred his entry melting away. In its place stood Omori, her shape changed. Her mannequin was the smallest one he had seen yet, and remarkably humanoid. She had even bothered to manipulate a face into it.

In fact, the entire body looked almost like a doll of a girl. A frilly dress, large eyes, locks of curled hair, all carved from that same ashen wood. Like a victorian child cast in monochrome. She smiled, in a way that was *almost* bright, yet not quite human.

"You found me so quickly, ehehe!" she giggled. "Caught, caught! Very well done." The expressions were a little off, but Mercury knew they were genuine, so he returned her smile.

"I'm rather good at looking, is all," he said, letting his focus drop and the world fall back into place again, its hidden bits hiding away once more.

She nodded eagerly, clapping her hands together. "Indeed! I hardly believed it, but it seems Arber didn't exaggerate in the slightest. How wonderful. They are known to embellish stories. As suits their persona." She gave a small roll of her doll-eyes. "What a boorish subject to choose, pirates."

Mercury huffed in amusement. "And I presume your persona is that of a girl?"

"Not at all!" she said, placing her hand behind her back and smiling brightly. "I am just a girl! I find humans just so delightful. I've always wanted to be one, you see! So I get as close as I can."

"You want to be human?" he asked, curious.

Instantly, she picked up on the true meaning of the question. "Oh, yes, but not that way. I understand my duties to this realm, so please refrain from making me into one, hehe. Observing from a distance and interacting with those that make their way here is plenty for me."

Mercury nodded. "I see. Then, I'll treat you like I would any other human. Any reason you chose to be a girl?"

"Oh!" her face lit up with excitement. "Well, you see, these dresses are delightful! And I just find round faces rather adorable. The wooden aesthetic also works better with this than if I emulated an adult. This is a little unsettling in its own way to people, but less so than adults."

"Fair enough, then," Mercury nodded. "Have I proven myself enough to be let in?" He tilted his head with a smirk.

Omorica giggled again, her wooden face shifting to allow the motion. "Of course. I was never going to leave you outside. Come on in!"

Before he had another chance to reply, the floor under him rapidly accelerated, moving Alice, Orin and him inside.

The acceleration was so rapid, it threw him off balance for a moment, but he had enough travel and adaption Skills to stabilize him almost immediately, instead able to enjoy seeing the cast chambers roll by. Rather than the tunnels of wood that Arber favoured, here, the floor seemed to be made from roiling seas of shadow, and the ceilings were cavernous.

Dozens of nooks and crannies stood, with deep shadows in them, and the place was lit up sparsely with light sources. The few flames that were around often found themselves in cages, or being used to cast starker shadows by being partially blocked.

Omoria had also styled the whole place in a very *human* way. There were facsimiles of windows, covered by heavy drapes. Pieces of furniture, nonfunctioning lamps, couches, bookshelves filled with wooden replicas were all about.

It was almost like she collected human culture, but had no way to preserve the real stuff, so she simply cast it from wood. Or, maybe, she had ways to preserve them, but didn't want to actually take anything away from humans?

Mercury eyed her a little, but the girl was simply smiling brightly, looking around at her own creation. Occasionally minor details would shift a little, creating new shadows or moving old ones away. Some of them seemed almost alive, and when Omori waved at them, they waved back.

'Right,' Mercury thought. *'Definitely alive, then.'*

With the floor moving at rapid speeds, it took not very long until the scion, the doll, the heroine, the envoy, and the mopaaw made their way to the ruler of Shadow.

Mercury found himself in a vast hall, even vaster than the previous ones. There were many light fixtures, but the shadows in the room were ravenous. They seemed to almost gnaw at the illumination, as if to sustain themselves, so the bonfires and chandeliers were still almost drowned out by darkness.

Still, in that blackness, countless tiny objects sparkled. Spheres of glass and bits of silver. Polished metal and crystals. Was the ruler of shadow also a bit of a hoarder?

"Mercury," they greeted. "Namefinder, and reshaper. You have come to my court."

"So it would seem," Mercury nodded at the ruler of Shadow. He felt no hostilities from the creature, even. With their body shifting, Mercury waited for them to speak again.

A long few seconds passed. "Once again, I find the touch of the void upon you. My court stands vigil against that outside force, you know? Us and the representatives of chill. It falls upon us to rear the guardians of the void. It is cold and dark outside, and so we must be cold and dark, too."

"... Right," Mercury nodded slowly. "Yes. I have a piece of a void creature in my inventory. Is there any use for it, or should I simply get rid of it?"

The ruler seemed surprised at that. "You managed to keep a piece from disintegrating? Remarkable. Perhaps, if crafted before returning to the material world, you may be able to use its destructive properties in your favour. Perhaps you could build it into that sinister prosthesis of yours," they suggested.

"Hm, not a bad idea," Mercury nodded. The Dream of Starvation did seem like the type of item that may be receptive to absorbing a piece of voidflesh, especially since it had already feasted on the blood of Yearning. So, some more esoteric materials added to it might benefit it. "Your input is accepted."

Shadow nodded. "Right, then. First, I am glad to see your leg is healing well. Your performance in the trials was unexpected, to say the least. You exceeded what anyone could have predicted, as you seem to have a habit of. More importantly, though, what do you need from me? To make this process of name finding as easy as possible for us."

With that question, Mercury focused again. He was here to find the name of Shadow, after all. For a moment, he let his mind drift into ihn'ar, seeing if he could drag forth the name as effortlessly as those of the ancient trees, but it did not come.

Not that he had expected it too. The rulers were vast and unfathomable, the aura of power hovering around Shadow like an eclipse to all light. Shadow was wreathed in cruel darkness, speaking of a willingness to do what must be done. Yet those shadows also played with the light, speaking of a character that may not be as full of gravitas as he might originally expect.

Mercury quickly dropped the ihn'ar again, when the seams of the world became apparent. He had a feeling that looking between the shadows was not somewhere he needed to see, right now.

"Well," he started slowly. "I would need to understand you, as a person. What you do, why you do it, how you choose to live. So, for the foreseeable future, I suppose I will try to - and excuse the pun here - shadow you."

The ruler seemed faintly surprised. "I see. So, for the first time in... a while, I suppose, I'll have a roommate."

Alice gave a chuckle at that, and Omoria giggled. "That is probably the fastest way, I suppose," Mercury noted with some amusement. It was also not how he had expected this to go, yet, here he was.

"So it shall be. Thank you, Omoria, for bringing him here. Thank you, young guardian, for having forged an early bond."

Though the words directed at the serpent were kind, the scion did not enjoy them it seemed. Mercury understood. In a lot of ways, it must have felt like mockers. Had it won, there might now be hostility between the court and Mercury, so its loss was beneficial... but no less humiliating.

Regardless, It bowed its serpentine head, then slithered out of the room wordlessly, probably glad to never have to see Mercury again. Omoria, on the other hand, remained right by his side. The ruler glanced at her for a long moment.

"Is this your choice, then?" the massive shadow asked.

Omoria nodded. "Yes. Mercury has proven his strengths a few times, but he does not know the fae realm that well. If I am allowed, I would like to remain by his side while he is here. Arber also recommended this, since they hope for us faerie houses to forge a closer bond with him."

"I give you my permission," the ruler of Shadow nodded. "Accompany him if you so choose."

"Ehehe, well, it's a little awkward to say, but... I wasn't asking you, at all," Omoria said. Her lips were twisted into a rebellious smirk, and Mercury knew she didn't find it awkward at all. "It is up to *Mercury* who accompanies him."

The ruler stared at her for a long moment. "Right," they said eventually. "I suppose so. What say you, Mercury?"

He smiled. "Until now, the ancient ones have been rather helpful. Until revoked, Omoria has my permission to stay around in a reasonable capacity."

Happily, the girl jumped and clapped her hands. "Yay! How lovely. I have lots of things I want to show you, Mercury!" she said excitedly, then slowed down a little. More calmly, she added, "when you have time, I mean."

An excitable girl and a timid ruler. Mercury could handle that, he thought.

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Soon, the first day drifted by. He'd slept in the same room as the ruler, being the throne room. Apparently, Shadow rarely left that place anymore. It lived there almost exclusively, tending to the ancient darkness in the crevices.

Mercury learnt why not too long after. He followed the ruler around and, for a bit, it was a little awkward. But soon, the massive creature seemed to mostly put his presence out of its mind, though his <Veil> probably also contributed to that a little, and he got to observe the ruler of Shadow as they naturally existed.

And seeing it... Mercury felt conflicted. The Shadow slinked through the vast halls, and other fae parted where they passed. They tended to the smaller shadows, young and ancient. Rearranging furniture, deepening the darkness, extinguishing some light sources and igniting others.

It looked almost as if they were feeding pets, some older and some younger. But the ruler of Shadow went about it almost mechanically. As if it was just not quite *there* anymore.

Slowly, step by step, the two of them made their way through the faerie house, shifting things around until it was all suitable. It took hours, since each of the halls were vast and the ruler seemed in no hurry. And then, eventually, it was done, and the ruler dissolved.

Of course, Mercury followed. When the shadows that made up the creature's body sunk into the ground, he quickly relied on <Ancient Shadowweaving> and turned into one himself.

As his body disintegrated into a two dimensional, dark facsimile of what he was, the vastness of the court became even clearer. When the world changed into shadow and blank space, the cavernous vastness compressed down to a mirror world of darkness, it was even larger.

Suddenly, the faerie house was not just cavernous, it was gigantic. Instead of just tall, the ceilings seemed endlessly vast, the ashen wood casting a firmament in the sky above. And in that world of darkness, the ruler of Shadow stood before Mercury.

And it had grown, too. Rather than the large, amorphous body it usually held, now the ruler had swelled to enormous proportions. In the shape of a giant owl, it towered over Mercury, looking down at him with its head tilted.

It reached out with one feathered wing, getting close to Mercury, almost touching him, but then stopping. Its head stopped being tilted. "This one does not like to be touched," it said, speaking slowly. "This one... is not one of mine, is it?"

The ruler had forgotten who Mercury was. "I am not," Mercury nodded. "But I am a friend. You invited me here."

"Oh," it said. Slightly confused, but not unhappy. "Did I? How wonderful." Then it turned around, its body snapping to face forward. "Would you like to be shown around?"

"I would love to," Mercury nodded.

"Wonderful. Let me see what I can do, then," the ruler spoke, then morphed again.

Its enormous form compressed down, shrinking into a smaller shape as the shadows that constructed it became ever darker. In the end, it resulted in an absolutely abyssal owl, darker than the blackest nights, that stood at about Mercury's height.

Then, it excitedly flapped its wings, soundlessly lifting into the air. "Follow?" it asked.

And with a nod, Mercury did.

Moments later, the owl darted forward soundlessly. He had expected there to be gusts of wind, but even as it moved with great speed, it remained entirely quiet.

Relying on his shadowy constitution and affinity with travel, it was easy for Mercury to keep up. Using <Itinerant>, he was able to move more when he moved, and by weaving his own shadow, he could glide forward without ever taking a step.

The two of them began making progress rather quickly, flitting by ancient shadows, some of them moving, almost alive. No, not almost.

Some of the shadows *were* alive. Of course they were, this was the court of shadow, after all. Some of the shadows must have simply become so ancient, so vast, so old, that they took on a life of their own. Maybe children perceived them as scary and so scary fae were born from them.

Maybe someone took comfort in the darkness, took solace in the shade, and a kind shadow was born.

What a strange thought, Mercury deemed it. But he enjoyed it, really. Seeing this different way of life, so alien to what he was used to. The way the shadows moved, interacted with one another. They entangled, speaking soundlessly, dozens of them gathering and engaging in activities he barely understood.

Luckily, he had a guide. "These two, over there, are growing fruits of darkness," the ruler chirped happily. "They will plant the seeds, let them grow into deeper shadows, bearing fruit eventually, ones that can restore ones that have over gorged on light and begun to fade."

"Over there, these are dancing," they said, gesturing at a few shadows which were weaving apart, then growing into one again, as if cast by a flickering fire. "Forming bonds is important. Darkness, too, must have a place to find solace, after all."

"These are building little worlds. Weaving shadows into one another can deepen them, building more layers, more space, more darkness for us to live in. A valiant task."

"Oh, those are shapers. Young shadows can go to them to have their shapes changed. When they are still too inexperienced to do it themselves, these ones assist. It can be very necessary when one's shape does not suit oneself."

"Here are the collectors. They make sure to keep samples of every shadow, treasured little mementos. Like a diary of what has happened. Preserving our history, both for individuals, and for our realm."

"Look to your right. Those are our hunters, bringing down the shadows that have become a little too wild. Some do it for sport, too, but not here. They bring in wayward shadows who need to be reminded of who they are."

"And here," they said, "are the resting grounds. None of us age, but time can wear one down. So, the resting grounds are where shadows go to die. Inside are the executioners, who will lay tired shadows to rest, forever. Their darkness will then flow outside and feed our fields of shadow fruit."

Mercury took it all in, taking his time to see the sights of this realm. Every so often, the ruler of shadow would stop, then turn around to ask him who he was. Every time, Mercury replied that he was a visitor, or a guest, and would like to be shown around. And every time the old ruler seemed to happily accept that reality, and explain some more.

It was a little sad, seeing how forgetful they were. Mercury hoped that this, too, would heal a little when reminded of who they were. Still, for now, he just went along with them, even if they repeated some explanation and some stories.

Even if sometimes, they lost their way and strayed into branching paths that they did not really need to go down. The trip continued like that for a while, peacefully visiting the different shadows, sometimes asking after their concerns, and sometimes intervening to fix them.

The ruler of Shadow seemed approachable to the fae in this realm. They all broached their issues without protest. If they wanted help, it was willingly given. Mercury thought it was rather sweet.

Eventually, they found the place where the faerie shadows and the human shadows intersected. The border was marked with a grove, setting apart the mystical and the mundane. From there on out, the shadows were not as lively.

If they began to stir, of course, they were welcome to shift closer to the fae realm. But beyond the grove, there were simply endless fields of shadows that were being cast or once used to be cast. Mundane ones, not really young, but not ancient either. Wandering ones, because the sun arced overhead, first causing them to exist, then snuffing them out all over again.

Simply put, this was where ephemeral, temporary shadows laid.

And that place was both everchanging, and full of rubble. When buildings were brought down and shattered, so too were their shadows, falling apart into broken pieces. Then laying here.

A whole swarm of living shadows was there, sifting through the bits, picking them up, reshaping them into little orbs of darkness to be used to feed or reconstruct other shadows, turning broken bits into new material.

In a way, this was both a graveyard of lost potential, shadows snuffed out before turning alive, and at the same time, it was what gave rise to the life of the rest of the shadows. What let them build their buildings and what let them till their fields.

“Something must be used to build,” the ruler said. “Humans cut down trees, things that once lived. These shadows...” They paused, scooping some dark rubble up with their wing. “They could have lived, some day. But they broke, when they didn’t yet. Is that more or less sad than bringing down something with moderate life?”

“They were never alive,” Mercury said slowly. “So there cannot be any tragedy.”

The ruler turned to him, slowly. Faintly, it nodded. “So you say.”

“What is life, for a shadow?” Mercury asked.

“Depth,” came the answer, instantly. “To grow deeper, vaster, darker. To embrace more of the world.”

“Then these never lived. So there is nothing to mourn. Don’t cry for trees that never grew. Don’t cry for stones that did not turn into golems. Life matters when you are cared about. The living matter more than the ones who do not even exist.”

Curiously, the owl tilted its head. “And how do you decide that?”

“I don’t,” Mercury said. “I think everyone must make their own decision. And of course, it is more nuanced than this, but in my world, there were people who begrudged the living when they snuffed out something not yet born. And it never came from a place of care, but from one of control.”

Slowly, they nodded. “I see.”

“Here, no one is even dying. No one is suffering. So mourn, but do not tear yourself apart over it.”

"Your words are acknowledged," the ruler said. "And shall be considered." They paused, staring out silently at the fields of broken darkness for a while longer. "Let us go rest for today, visitor."

Mercury nodded. "Yes, let us."

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A moment later, the darkness around them fell away, as the two reshaped into their physical bodies. Mercury returned to being a mopaaw, his fur a pale colour compared to the surrounding darkness, and the ruler of shadow reemerged as an amorphous blob of darkness.

"You have given me much to think, Yr'enzel," they said. "Now I rest on those words. Follow."

So, Mercury did. Walking through cavernous rooms of ashen wood for only a scant few moments, until they reached a room. A door, set into the wall, ornamented with a hundred tiny carvings, telling some kind of story.

It opened before Mercury had time to decipher it, and the ruler slinked inside. There was a bed for Mercury, sized to suit him, in one of the corners. Meanwhile, for the ruler of shadow, there was a circular indentation in the ground, a little like a tub.

Their whole body laid down in it, then the bonds holding the shadows together dissolved, and the ruler spilled into a lake of liquid darkness, filling their "bed". Then, the floor lit up with a faint glow, casting only the tub and Mercury's bed into shadow.

"Can you sleep with this light?" the ruler asked, the words spilling forth from their liquid form.

Mercury nodded. "Shouldn't give me too much trouble."

"Very well. Good night."

"Good night," Mercury said.

Then, he kept one zeyjn awake, keeping watch over the ruler. He sunk into ihn'ar. Then he broke the golden veil.

Despite all his work during the day, he still had much to learn, it seemed. He focused on the shadow cast by his bed, the way it reached upwards to the ceiling as the floor glowed. And then, he began to weave it.

So much to learn, still.