

Chapter 219: Through the Fae Realm

Mercury spent a rather peaceful time sleeping. Of course, he found himself in his inner world, with Kim, the gardener, working away at the landscape. Whisperstar flitted across the sky. Mercury smiled.

Having something living, something moving in this inner world of his was rather pleasant.

The landscape had many features now, courtesy of breaking the world of Yearning. Maybe he should prepare for a similar influx once he interacted with the other thrones. Well, it would cause a stir, but overall, it was still beneficial for this place.

Having it grow bigger could attract attention, but then again, maybe from it, he would learn what to do about the void, other than close the doors to it. Mercury wondered. Did it need fighting, really?

Clearly the fae were afraid of it - and rightly so, given what happened during his last interaction with one of them. When he had let it in, it had achieved a great deal of mutual destruction with the avatar of Yearning that had invaded this realm of his.

Mercury let the line of thoughts drop as Whisperstar descended from the sky. The creature spun and twisted, its twinkling body turning into a shooting star, trailing wisps of light. "Mercury!" they greeted excitedly.

"Hello, Whisperstar," he returned with a smile. "Is everything alright?"

"There is a visitor!" the spirit proclaimed happily.

Mercury tilted his head a little. "A visitor?"

Trailing starlight, Whisperstar twirled around Mercury happily. "Yes, yes! A visitor. In my world, adjacent to yours!"

Strange. Mercury knew that Whisperstar's manifestation here was as much their true body as it was a gateway to their inner world. He wondered whether it was like layers, one sphere contained in another, or two dreams next to one another, connected by a bridge.

Regardless, he nodded. "I see. Are they being kind?"

Whisperstar seems a little confused at that. "They have not yet broken anything?"

"Would you like me to meet them?" Mercury asked, carefully.

"Yes! Come play!"

With that, their body flicked back upwards, into the patchwork sky, slamming into it and turning into a pinprick of distant light once more. But the tether was there.

With a twist of his resting minds, still rapidly recovering, Mercury stepped through it, and in one single moment, everything around him changed. Green grass was replaced by an endless sparkling darkness. The ground felt faintly wet, like he was standing in ankle deep, perfectly serene water.

It was like the ground was a perfect mirror of the sky, showing a firmament of sparkly stars. They differed slightly in colour and brightness, but each one still shone valiantly for itself. It was a beautiful, cloudless, moonless night sky.

Within the water, there stood a small table. It was made from glowing pinpricks of light, too. Tiny sources of illumination, connected by bridges of starlight. The chairs were, similarly, made from that same framework. Thin lines of light gave the surfaces trapped between the lines a glassy look.

Mercury walked towards the table, then hopped onto one of the chairs. There were three of them, none particularly intended for humans. Mercury's was a stool, almost as high as the table itself, so that he could reasonably lay down on it and still see the other members of the conversation.

Whisperstar's chair was more of an obelisk - a stone monolith with a spherical hole carved into it at the top, housing Whisperstar in all their sparkly glory. Wisps of light trailed through the stone in channels carved into it.

The third chair was glassy yet still seemed soft. It was covered in thin wisps of frost and sparkly snow. Upon it sat a woman with dark skin, wearing a wide-brimmed hat and a dark suit.

Instantly, Mercury recognized her. "It has been a while, Caretaker," he said, breathing in the crisp, quiet air that followed the woman around. Unlike so many of his recent encounters, this one was entirely non hostile to him.

"So it has. I can safely say that it is a pleasure to meet you again, Mercury," the woman hummed. A faint smile played across her lips. "It is quite hard to find an avenue to reach you. Discreetly, I mean."

"Oh? What do you mean by that?" he asked.

The caretaker held a gloved hand in front of her mouth, hiding a widening smile. "You are unaware of the protections on yourself, it seems."

Mercury tilted his head a little. "Again, I do not understand."

"Let me speak plainly. I wanted to visit your dreams, but their boundaries were solid and impermeable. I didn't wish to break anything, so I instead searched another avenue, but installing an option for me to "knock", so to speak, would be rather lovely," she said, her words without judgement.

"I shall try, I suppose," Mercury said, somewhat amused. In a way, he had seen the realm less as his home and more as a sanctuary, to lock away from all the rest of the world. But at the same time, it was a part of him he would rather like to share with some people.

And the caretaker... Was she one of those people? She knew him better than many, having heard his story when she laid eyes on him. She had been kind about it, too. He had a hunch, even, that she'd protected him from the wrath of the crimson sun, once. Call it his <Intuition>.

"Thank you for hearing me out," the woman said, wearing a wry smile. Unlike with the fae, her words had no resonance with the world. It was a simple, genuine statement of appreciation - untied from any covenant or promise.

"Of course," Mercury said. "How did you find my friend?"

"It is part of my duties to search the sky for more stories. A blossoming star surely had an interesting rise - so surrounded by the past haze of death, now burning it all away. Frankly, it is remarkable," she said. "I feel happy to see such a change in nature, brought about so simply."

Trails of sparkling light lifted from the stone that Whisperstar hovered in, trailing the rim of the caretaker's hat. They seemed happy at the praise, content to just witness the conversation. Perhaps a little impatient, in the way children could be.

"Right, well, I am glad this has worked out. I hope this won't be too rude, but why exactly did you look for me?" Mercury asked.

The caretaker smiled. "Because I used to rule the court of Silence."

Ah. That made sense.

"But I abdicated. Amicably, I will add. I discarded that nature, and I am still grateful I did. It simply did not suit me to be a fae. Letting the vicissitudes of life pass me by for novelty..." she wistfully shook her head. "Not me."

A brief pause followed, until the caretaker looked upon Mercury again, those deep, ancient eyes. "After me, the faceless one took over, and Silence warped. But that one, too, discarded the mantle. For different reasons, they sought physicality, because that way, there were more secrets to access."

Mercury's heart thumped at that. *The faceless one*. "Is that... the thing that abducted Iris?"

The caretaker tilted her head. "I am unsure. I do not read your mind, after all. Was its face a mask of blank skin, ripping open when it talked? Did it morph into facsimiles of others you know?"

He nodded.

"It seems it was, then," She agreed. "Yes, in its hands, the court of Silence became one of Secrets. Rather than peaceful quiet, it became a resentful one. A silence that would not let anyone partake in what was hidden inside."

"Right, I see. What after?"

The caretaker placed her hands on the table, intertwining them. "When leadership changed again, the court started breaking. Now, it is broken without a proper name, but I suppose you could call it Loneliness."

Mercury thought, then, that the courts probably influenced their rulers just as much as their rulers influenced them. The fact that they could step down... was it a thing that had been abolished because of Silence breaking into Loneliness?

"Does the current ruler have a name?" he asked.

"Lionel," the caretaker said. "That was his name, once. Lionel of Loneliness, now."

Mercury nodded. "You care for him?"

She smiled, in that sad way that showed her wrinkles. "Of course I do. I'm terribly sad that he's dead, though. I know what you've done with Yearning, that it was a rebirth. Whoever comes out the other end - it won't be Lionel."

Once again, her eyes locked onto Mercury, unwilling to let go. "But such is my duty. I am the caretaker. I could not be the ruler of Silence, because that is not who I am. I care. And so, when I see others suffer, I will feel empathy. Such is life. I refuse to hide from it."

"Admire," Mercury said. "I try to be compassionate, too. But sometimes it comes with difficulty."

"Don't I know it," the old woman said, leaning back in her chair with a smile. For a long moment, she remained silent, simply breathing. It was quiet, but not uncomfortable. Eventually she spoke again. "Kill Lionel for me."

"That's not quite how this works," Mercury said.

The caretaker nodded. "I know. That's fine, of course. You'll do your best. But if it's needed, I don't want you to hesitate on my behalf. Do what needs to be done. Let the man rest in peace, let him know that there is endless company in death."

Company in death. Those words stood out to Mercury, and he felt a shiver trail down his spine. "What is death like?" he asked.

Very slowly, the woman before him tilted her head. It went a little too far, in the end, in an unsettling way. Her eyes seemed darker, now, but her expression was one of surprise. "You truly want to know," she said. "I see." She smiled, warmly. "There isn't an answer to that question."

"Why not?"

"Because no one who's alive will ever understand what it's like being dead. You'd have to die first, to find out. It is, fundamentally, inexplicable. It is different for everyone, yet the same. Some are restless in death. Some wage war forever. Some wait at a train station. Some sleep, some dream, some work, some read, some dance. All of them are alone, yet in endless company. Because everyone dies, and everything dies."

She smiled. "And it's really not all that scary. It's not about meeting anyone, or about some grand ever-after. At the end of the day, death is what you make of it. It's grief and sorrow and all the happy memories you've ever made all at once, and it is not that at all."

Silence, once more, hung in the air. Mercury took a deep breath, and that icy aura once more laid on his skin. But he did not find himself minding it. After a long moment, he just nodded. "I see," he said.

"Surprisingly, you mostly do," the caretaker agreed. "Few see as much as you do, traveller. Your perspective is admirable, and I appreciate your curiosity, and your understanding."

Her words were genuine, and mercury smiled. "I'll kill him if I need to. Lionel, I mean. He'll die if it's necessary. Before that, though, perhaps I can turn the court of Loneliness into something better. Preserve him, find something more suitable."

The woman looked at him for another long moment. "I see," she said. "Thank you." With that, she pushed herself up from the chair. "Thank you for listening to an old lady. Thank you for taking my wishes into consideration. And thank you for hoping to spare my brother."

"Of course. I will make sure you can visit in the future. If you'd like to hear another story of mine - or tell me one of yours," Mercury said, letting the invite hang in the air.

Already having turned around, the caretaker raised a gloved hand, giving a wave. "I'll consider it," she said, almost flippantly, but with humor. Mercury was sure it was not the last time she would visit.

Then, she stepped forward, and fell into the water that covered the ground, swallowed by the thin film. A single ripple spread out across the glassy surface, growing ever smaller as it travelled, until the water was still once more.

Whisperstar lifted from their obelisk, dancing around Mercury. "Did I do well? What a nice visitor! So interesting! She felt familiar, you know? Like my past. When I wasn't a star. But now I am! So she felt distant, too."

The spirit chattered away as Mercury rose from his own chair, smirking at his friend's antics. "Yeah. I think she's rather kind." Almost too kind, he thought. Telling him to kill her own brother... well. If he was among the broken thrones, then perhaps, it was better to not be at all.

In some ways, he was already dead, a shell only puppeteered around by the perceptions others have of him. Was it cruelty or kindness to deliver a true death? Was it cruelty or kindness to change someone's nature if that nature caused them suffering?

Mercury didn't think there was a good answer to that, either.

With a small sigh, he discarded the thought. "Whisperstar, is it alright if I head back for now?"

The sparkling child flitted about, unbothered. "Of course! It was nice to have you visit, Mercury."

Smiling, the mopaaw hopped off his chair. "I'll see about visiting again."

Then he stepped back into his own dream.

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After that, the night passed eventlessly, and Mercury simply spent his time practicing. Hours passed quickly in his inner world. Two of his minds remained fully in the dark.

It was strange, deriving joy from that, but letting those pieces slumber made him feel more human. Then again, even without splitting his mind, and with barely any effort, he was able to learn far faster than he ever had back on earth.

That night, he focused on learning more <Ice Magic>, since he'd been neglecting it a little. Similarly to his runecarving Skills. Distantly, as he transmuted his mana and formed spells to create icicles, he wondered if he could carve runes using purely his mind now.

Shaking his head, he focused again, repeating the simple exercises.

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[<Ice Magic> has levelled up! <Ice Magic lv. 4 -> 5>]

Day broke. Sibori was, of course, already awake. Xe'd prepared a breakfast for Mercury, a translucent sirup, filled with what looked like flakes of pinecones. It tasted surprisingly like breakfast cereal. He enjoyed it.

Alice stirred next, and Orin only woke when the sun was higher in the sky. The events of yesterday had apparently taken a lot out of them - Mercury imagined that facing the ruler of their court may not have exactly been in the job description of escorting him.

Well, it was what it was. He wouldn't lose any sleep over it. Instead, he turned to Sibori. "Have you contacted Arber?"

The spirit nodded at him, seemingly pleased. "Yes. The connection is established. We have been granted an adjacent realm to meet."

"Another realm?" Mercury asked.

"Yes. The fae realm is built up in layers. Oberon forged a tiny, new one, specifically for us tree spirits. Of course, the rulers could visit, but I doubt they would. The different territories are sometimes on the same planes, sometimes on different ones. It's part of what helps them stay so distinct."

Right, that explained the tiny amount of blending, and the drastic differences. Mercury nodded a little. Could he visit that place?

Probably.

By now it was very hard to keep him out of places - frankly, mundane defences probably worked a lot better than ones that relied on different realms or dimensions. He could break those reasonably quickly, but a solid steel wall? That would give him trouble.

What a silly thought.

Mercury smiled. "I'm glad to hear it. Perhaps one day I will meet the others?"

"They seem rather eager to meet you," Sibori said with a pleasant tone. "You have done much for me. I will advocate for you, friend. Arber seems to see you in a similar light. You and us, we aren't that different."

"I suppose we aren't," Mercury said with a small chuckle. "We want the fae realm to survive. It is worthwhile preserving simply because it exists."

Sibori nodded again. "Yes. The life here is unique. Some of its aspects don't deserve preservation, so we must pull them like weeds in a garden. You have shown us that it is possible, and we ancient ones have decided to take a more proactive role in your mission. I make this promise on behalf of the other faerie houses: The non-fae living within us will be treated better."

It was a weighty promise. It didn't slam into the air like Sibori's gratitude, but it did hang heavily for a moment. He acknowledged it with a nod. "Now then, let's put that aside for now, Sibori. How did you sleep?"

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A few hours later, Mercury was off again. In a carriage with Orin, he was off to the court of shadow. The fae had made the decision to create a version of themselves to accompany Mercury.

He wasn't averse to their company. The fae was quiet. Not as much as Alice, and they had a habit of staring far more, but Mercury found them quite accepting of his antics, and he appreciated that.

At the court of shadow, Asher would be waiting. The scion of Scorch had been sent to accompany Mercury as well, probably reporting back some results of his operations to his court.

Once again, that much wasn't an issue. In fact, he was more than sure that eyes were on him. The rulers were nosey, and he was definitely showing them something they hadn't seen in a while. Lady Witness, Lady Whisperblossom... almost every fae he had ever met seemed to have a vested interest in his success or downfall.

Such was the nature of their politics. Mercury would simply do his best to bear with them. But right now, he was travelling. So there wasn't much more to do... than sleep.

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Sleeping, of course, simply meant that he was making more time to practice. When all his zeyjn were fully rested, Mercury returned to keeping all three of them active permanently. With the amount of time he spent in his inner world, that meant that he was effectively awake for over thirty hours per day.

And he had three minds to spend all that time practicing.

With it, Mercury decided to learn. There was little pandora, the smithy Yasashiku had gifted him, still in his log. There, one of his zeyjn forged. Another carved runes into the nails - something which took some significant practice, in order to make his rij into a chisel. The third was using ice magic to rapidly cool the metal, simulating quenching.

He was getting almost a hundred hours of practice every day he spent travelling, and with all his learning boosts, it mattered even more.

During the off moments, he thought a little more. Which throne, he wondered, had broken first? Loneliness? Truth? Joy, or Yearning?

It was an interesting exercise of the mind, but he would simply have to work his way through them.

Mercury enjoyed travelling through the fae realm, though. When he was awake, he would sometimes look out the window to see the strange landscape. And sometimes, there would be fights, against the creatures that thrived in this destabilized reality. Alice took many of them down, and so did Mercury.

Over the week of travel time, he earned himself another level, too, going from 28 to 29. Combat still seemed a very viable source of exp. Did he not desire to help? Or maybe it was just consistently what pushed him over the edge.

Hopefully, in the future, he'd gain more levels from crafting. Mercury didn't particularly desire to be the best fighter around. He really just wanted...

What?

Freedom, maybe? He wanted to see the whole world. Every corner of Chronagen. Meet all the people there, the ones from Earth, and the ones from this world. He wanted to see the different continents, cultures, make friends, and see which parts of it were good and which were not.

If he could make the world a bit of a better place for his friends, that would be rather lovely, too.

Where else did he still want to go, though? There was, of course, the demon's continent of Arterus to the west, which seemed interesting. Koriell, the frozen wasteland, was north of the continent of Damoy he'd been on until now. There were lands to the east and south as well.

He wanted to see all of those. Then there were the depths of the ocean to explore, too. He didn't really need to breathe or sleep these days. Could he withstand that kind of pressure? And what kind of creatures were there down there? What about arches and tears?

Mercury smiled, then refocused on his training. He had so much left to do and see. He was looking forward to it.

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A page passed before he made it to the court of Shadow, and Mercury had substantially improved his crafting. <Novice Runecarving> had gained two levels, up to ten, then automatically evolved into <Apprentice Runecarving>. <Apprentice Crafting>, meanwhile, had gone from level five to six.

No additional levels for ice magic, at least, but that was fine, too. He wasn't in that much of a hurry.

What he did have fun with was seeing the change of the environment as they passed into the domain of shadow. Mellow's had been a little different than expected - this one, on the other hand, was very in character.

Hm. Perhaps there was correlation there. The realm of Chill, where he had met Arber, was also unlike what the name may suggest, and was one of the stabler ones. How strange. Perhaps, the more unlike its court a domain was, the less it influenced the associated ruler? Something to think about.

Shadow's realm was, as the name suggested, woven from shadow. It had a stark, monochrome aesthetic, and Mercury almost felt the colour leeching from him. Cloaked in shades of grey, he was still himself. Unlike last time, when it required he fully turn into a shadow

From there, it took them another two days to arrive at the main hub where the ruler lived - another tree spirit. This one was willow-shaped, with a twin trunk. Enormous branches hung low in the distance, some of them almost draping on the ground. Chains of shaded leaves hung from them.

And at its entrance were two figures. Another avatar of the ancient ones, an ashen mannequin, tall and with broad shoulders. Next to it was the serpent who Mercury had bested in a wager before.

"Welcome, Yr'enzel," the avatar greeted in a sonorous voice, as the carriage drew close. "To the court of Shadow."