

Chapter 185: Careful Conversing

Celash was difficult to read, honestly. Mainly due to the shifting features. Still, Mercury felt like he could at least somewhat understand the fae's intentions by monitoring their aura. The panther-like figure was wrapped in a dark haze to Mercury's mind, which spoke of decay. He was almost tempted to ask for the fae's age, but decided against it for now.

Instead, he simply settled for a nod. It was important to find himself allies in the courts, and while Arber and Alice seemed okay, they were not truly a *part* of the courts. "Certainly. Though I doubt you need my introduction."

The fae's aura swivelled in what Mercury guessed to be amusement. "I do not."

They said no more, leaving room for Mercury to speak.

He thought for a moment, picking his words carefully. "Perhaps, then, with the time usually spent on telling you what to call me, you could tell me a bit more about the court you belong to?"

"Dust?" they asked, their aura flickering again, this time to a darker shade. The grains of ash shifted slightly, the jewellery rotating slightly faster. "I suppose I could."

Once again they stopped speaking. "It would be a kind gesture."

Amusement flickered through them again. "I suppose so." The swirling slowed down again to a far more relaxed tempo. "Yes. Dust. One of many fae courts. Nowadays, we are almost closer to a house, however."

"You see, time erodes everything away, and this is what the court of Dust bands around," they explained. Their voice was melodic, if raspy. "Many of the courts cling to faded glory. Dust is both changing and static. At the end, there will be Dust. The path there may change, but the outcome is set in stone. Representing decay, it is only natural that our court, too, decays."

"Would you be willing to inform me about the other courts?"

They huffed for a moment, in a display of animalism. It was a small but strangely comforting movement of air, even if it sent the ash billowing. "There are many other courts. The courts of the seasons, always at each other's throats. The shifting courts. The courts of expansion and the courts of renewal... It would be pointless to name them when houses rise and fall like the tides."

Arber interjected. "It is useful to know what the courts stand for. Setting sail without a map is ill advised. Learning to maneuver this landscape, though, is a long endeavour, and one that we will deal with after your first outing if you are amicable to that."

Mercury simply nodded, then turned back to Celash. "Then that will be sufficient. Do you speak for yourself or your court?" he asked.

The panther of ash straightened, standing a little taller, a little prouder, and giving off a more significant presence. "Up until now I spoke for myself, but I must also speak to you as a representative of Dust."

"Acceptable," Mercury said.

With a nod, Celash continued. "The courts are in strife. This is nothing new, of course, but for the first time, we stand on the precipice of advancement. Things rarely change here, and one such as yourself... is a rather large change." For once, their dark aura flashed with hunger.

"Seeing one of the sins fall, even if it was more the disassembly of a rotting corpse, was quite impressive. My court would like to bargain for space upon this frontier of yours, on the remains of your fragment of gluttony. We wish to acquire territory-"

"Ah, so this is what this is all about," Mercury hummed. Finally, it made sense. Sure, some of these fae were happy to just see someone new to toy with, but people had been frustrated during this first outing. He had something they wanted, after all. "You wish for space in my dreams?"

The word rang out more loudly than it should, landing with weight. Not quite as heavy as the meaning of Hospitality, but certainly heavily enough. Celash lowered its head. "Indeed."

Mercury clicked his tongue. "Why?"

"To expand, of course. Territory which will naturally fall to time should be under the purview of Dust in the first place. We would-"

"No, no," Mercury interrupted. Perhaps he was being rude, but Celash had made the very simple mistake of stating their desire first. Now, Mercury knew what most people in this hall wanted from him. He saw a small grin flash across Alice's features, then vanish again. "I'm sure I can intuit why you would want this. Why should I give you anything?"

Celash gave off a tiny wisp of confidence. "We can bargain. Our court holds weight in the political landscape of the fae realm."

"You would have me give up a piece of myself, my territory, something I have built up by my own virtue, for *weight*?" Mercury almost added a scoff at the end, but decided his intonation was enough.

There were a few avenues Mercury could see Celash taking this discussion. First, they could refute his effort and state that this was simply his due to theft. But that would be an insult, and Mercury would have no reason to tolerate it.

Maybe they could offer more, or try to downplay the importance of his "territory". But he was fairly certain they would go another route...

"Surely you do not quite understand what it means to have the favour of another court," they said.

Bingo.

Trying to play on his lack of knowledge was easy, but showed their lack of faith. Plus, it was something he could capitalize on.

"You misunderstand, Celash," Mercury said. "It is not that I underestimate your weight. It is that I do not care for it. The ruler of all fae could very well offer me their weight and I would still decline."

"Accepting this offer of yours would be a debilitating mistake for me, Celash. You see, I specifically picked Arber as my retainer to remain without allegiance to any of the courts. As soon as I am seen picking sides, all other courts will attempt to win me over, by force, most likely."

"So, Celash. Please, correct me if at any point I am wrong, but gaining the favour of your court this way, would it not make me a target for all other faerie courts at once? Does your weight truly stand up against each and every other faerie in this very room, and against what they represent?"

While he was talking, Mercury could see it happen in real time. The greed of the courts had gotten to them. Their offer was pitiful, hoping to prey on his lack of knowledge, but he had read faerie stories before.

Now, as he was talking, he saw his action take effect. Eyes snapped towards the four of them, landing on Celash with a heavy gaze. Seeing the court of Dust try to snatch what everyone wanted, this new toy. Offering a pitiful prize.

Then the eyes changed to him, and the room went quieter. Whispers and hushed laughter were silenced. Groans of pain and pleasure disappeared. Nobody ate from the buffet. Nobody stepped on the dance floor. The gladiators in the arena went silent.

Almost comically, a change spread through the room. Each and every fae present realized how things were. That Mercury would not simply be easy prey, but try to slither and maneuver. Some of them grew more hungry, but most simply became more intense.

Because, while they knew what he was doing, they had to play along. That was how high society worked, after all. Everyone, together, pretended at civility. So, masterfully, each and every fae hid their animosity to Mercury.

But he saw it.

In their auras, they way those hazes that clung to their skin, or whatever else kind of thing they currently wore. Those ethereal presence shifted and darted, to hostility and respect, to hunger and need, to wariness and playful humor.

And they all focused on Celash with displeasure.

The cloud of ash knew they messed up, but had no way to take back what they said. There was no retreating, no hope, only the possibility of salvaging an already committed mistake.

It bowed its panther-shaped head. "This denial shall be received. I see that our offer was inadequate. We hope that despite this failure, our parting here shall be on amicable terms, and that we may eventually bring this discussion to a satisfactory conclusion." Then, the cloud disappeared, slithering back into formlessness and into the crowd.

Crash had only assumed the shape of a panther in hopes of seeming more familiar to Mercury. Getting him to let his guard down. But he knew better than that. Instead, he sent the court of Dust packing with a whole lot more hidden hostilities.

Would they lash out at him for this? Perhaps, but most likely not. Celash had retreated with polite words, attempting to stop talking to Mercury without any hostilities left behind. Could Dust even afford to hurt him?

Yes. More than certainly. He shouldn't get cocky. But would they hurt him?

Most likely not. The other courts wanted a piece of him, too, and now they would be suspect number one if anything happened. Honestly, it would be in their best interest to defend him, if they didn't want to put an even bigger strain on goodwill with the other courts.

Arber smiled as Celash retreated. "You sure braved that storm, matey!" they said. "Good on you for not burning any bridges, either. Keep this up and you'll be just fine. Just don't get cocky, since the sea is unforgiving..." They paused dramatically, then added. "Anyway, I think our next encounter is coming up. Best of luck, scallywag."

A moment later, the crowd parted for lady Witness. Her thin, icy silhouette was surrounded by the arms spreading from her back. They almost formed a full circle around her, some empty, some clutching drinks, plates, or wrapped around things Mercury could not determine yet.

The animated ice statue walked with confidence, stopping slightly closer than Mercury found comfortable. She was tall, too, like many of the fae around. They seemed to prefer inhumanly tall figures, probably because of some disdain of being looked down upon.

Which is exactly what lady Witness did to him for a moment. Arber nodded to the current occupant of their house, and the lady nodded back, then all her dozens of eyes finally focussed on Mercury.

She remained silent for a long while.

Mercury took the time to study her aura. It was a haze of cold, almost like breathing out frosty mist on a winter day, but it was far more intense than that. Rather than frost mist, it seemed to suck the warmth right out of him. It was colder and more cruel than even the harshest days of winter.

There was hardly a comparison for him to strike. Her aura was that of cessation. Of a heart beating for the final time before hypothermia claimed another victim. The inevitable

knowledge that no one would rescue you, no one would find you, and you would be buried and freeze alone.

It sent shivers down his back, but he suppressed the urge.

Despite the fact that he was staring down a cruel, raging blizzard of a presence, he was not defenceless. With a small twist of his mind, he relied on ihn'ar, to summon a fraction of his own storm. A simple bubble around himself, twisting his <Rainfall> into a simple, windy shield.

For a moment, he felt a clash, like her aura was trying to freeze his silvery drops. Then, a dozen of her eyes widened and her presence retreated. The blizzard flashed with surprise, as though howling upon having found a warmer wind blowing it aside.

"Mercury. I believe if this were not your First Visit, I would be killing you right now," she said.

He looked at her, studied her myriad eyes and the frozen mist of her presence, and the arms that clutched the drinks. Nothing gave anything away. She was perfectly cool and in control of herself. Poised beyond belief.

That gave away how unsettled she was. Such control would usually never be necessary, not when facing someone less powerful than you. In fact, she hadn't shown such control before.

"Hardly," he intoned casually. "I find myself thinking that perhaps you were testing me, really, and I believe if I were unkind, I could very well take offense at that."

The lady blinked. It happened in a wave that spread across her face from left to right, eye after eye closing then reopening. "I see. Perhaps we have misunderstood each other. I did not mean to test you."

"And I did not mean to offend you, but your cold was suffocating."

She paused, as if thinking, then shifted slightly. Mercury felt he understood. "Your body," she intoned carefully. "It is crafted from flesh and blood?"

He blinked. "It is not crafted at all, lady Witness."

Once more, a wave of blinks crossed her face. "I see," she said slowly, and the cruel cold withdrew further. Now, only its edges brushed up against his Rain. "I did not mean to overstep."

That kind of almost apology seemed rare. He decided to accept it as best as he could for now. "I see your intentions. Is it unusual for fae to have bodies of flesh?"

She nodded once. "Quite. Many mimic them when going out of the fae realm, but life here is hostile. Fleishy confinements are impractical, and often have too many failings. Many young fae who experiment perish as such. Approximations of flesh only truly matter when entering a world with more stringent rules - a world such as yours, I presume?"

“Perhaps. I know that world also has creatures less fleshy than I. But as far as I know, blood and muscle is frequently found in living beings there.”

Once more lady Witness nodded. “Yes. I should have considered this. My presence is already overbearing to some fae, though I thought I’d restrained it enough. Pushing against a presence is usually seen as a sign of either weakness or rebellion. Rebelling against a host is considered a grave offense.”

“I see. I shall take this knowledge to heart in the future,” Mercury replied.

“An amicable reaction. I am happy we did not have a confrontation.”

“Indeed.”

The lady paused, once more, then moved slowly. One of her many arms grew... opaque. Like tiny bubbles of air formed in the ice. He realised she was making it warmer, so it wouldn’t harm him in being closer. Then she lowered it.

On her extended appendage, there was a plate with some food. It looked like... sushi. Rice with fish and vegetables laid atop it. Except the rice was pink, and some of the things laid atop the sushi still squirmed, even the vegetables.

“I have brought things from the banquet. Perhaps you would like to partake?”

Mercury gently shook his head. “Sadly, I must decline. Currently, I do not know how my body would react.”

“You carry a small aspect of gluttony within you, do you not?” lady Witness asked, tilting her head. But the cold, close around her, was still sharp and insidious.

“Indeed. That does not mean I will rely solely on it, lady Witness, when I can avoid such trouble.”

The lady nodded, then withdrew her hand. “A pity,” she said. “The cooks of this house of mine are quite outstanding.”

“I do not doubt their ability, I simply doubt my constitution,” he said. “As far as I am aware, your cuisine can be quite intense.”

About half the eyes blinked, leaving her face a sort of grid-like pattern of open and closed ones. It seemed to be in amusement. “Intense indeed. Care is a valuable tool, Mercury. You wield it well.”

“Your compliments are received,” Mercury said. By now, the lady Witness had lowered her head quite a bit. Her head was closer to his, though it required her to bow down a lot. “Now, lady Witness, is there anything you would require to talk to me about?”

She hesitated for a half moment, then sighed. “There always is,” she admitted. “As you are in my house for your First Visit, I am obliged to ascertain whether your retainer is suitable for you. Has Arber performed to your satisfaction?” she asked.

The tree turned their head towards the lady Witness and Mercury could swear they looked offended. He chuckled. "Arber has been an invaluable guide."

"And I perform my duties without desire for recompense," they added, shutting down the snake-like look in Witness' eyes down within a moment.

Instead of a pounce, her reaction became a stifled, albeit pleased nod. "Good. I hope to keep your stay within my house to your satisfaction. You have your retainer. If you require any additional staff or services for maintenance of your shell, they shall be provided as long as you are amicable."

Pride swung within her voice. She would do this without a price, because it would be unbecoming for a fae to not make sure another's outside was cared for during their stay. It told Mercury that he was in no danger of being stabbed with a physical knife, from most fae, at least.

He had noticed multiple much more material servants by now.

Still, he let a small smile creep onto his face. "I am amicable to a warm and soft bed at night. I am assuming the courts would like my presence for more than one day?"

"I may not speak for all courts, but Chill certainly would, yes. The average duration of a stay can vary wildly, of course, and you are free to leave anytime, however, the Hospitality of a First Visit always lasts for a full page or until the fae realm is left, whichever occurs sooner."

Ten days, then. That was how long he had to learn the rules. Mercury nodded. "I am amicable to staying the night, at least."

"A bed shall be prepared, then." He eyes lifted for a moment, eyeing the wooden mannequin to his side. "Given that Arber is your retainer, I imagine I will not need to inform you of its location?"

The tree manifested a wisp of a smile again. "This avatar is more than capable of guiding this one's charge to any rooms required."

"Arber's guidance is acceptable, yes."

Once more, lady Witness nodded. "There is more to discuss, of course, but I shall not monopolize your time. The other courts will take more of it upon themselves. I hope your impression of the court of Chill remains positive. In the unlikely case you are troubled beyond your retainer's means, feel free to reach out anytime."

With that, she spun around, her dress of snowflakes and icicles clinking and chiming as she moved, and then she disappeared beyond view into the middle of the crowd. This time, far fewer people dared to have their eyes drift onto the conversation.

Quite apparently, lady Witness wielded considerable power in her house. Otherwise, Mercury was sure that lady Whisperbloom would have approached him during their talk. Now, the lanky fae sauntered over, bringing with her the smell of decay and regrowth.

He felt a shiver run down his spine again, entirely different from the one he had before. Lady Witness was certainly fearsome in her own right, cold and calculating, but she was also very adherent to Hospitality.

Whisperbloom though... seemed less beholden to the concept. A bright smile was placed upon her face and the air around her smelled sickeningly sweet.

Arber turned their featureless face at the approaching lady for a long while. She took her sweet time coming over, too, picking up a drink from one place, a bit of food from another. Once, she snatched a piece of candy straight from Tirador's hands.

Though the man who had picked Mercury up was also different now. No longer wearing a human guise, for one, he had instead set the skull of a wolf onto a wooden, rooted, entangled frame. Flowers blossomed and rotted away on the tangled branches of his body. Still, Mercury recognized the fae by his aura.

A moment later, Whisperbloom stood in front of him again. Arber seemed troubled, like this was an inbound disaster he found no way to present, and Mercury immediately went on even higher alert.

The fae smiled, then the smile twisted into a grin. "Worried, little one?" she asked, her voice innocent and melodic and tantalizing.

Mercury took a deep breath, then realized he was inhaling the smell. For a moment, he felt his head go a little fuzzy. *Fuck that.*

Instantly, he summed a storm in his lungs, <Rainfall> bubbling up and letting oxygen course through his veins without breathing. He sealed off the interaction of his mana with the surroundings, instead drawing his entire presence into the confines of his fleshy shell. Even the pinprick of power that symbolized <Force of the Hecatoncheires> was withdrawn into his mortal frame.

"My vessel is vulnerable to yours, it seems," he said, forcing his voice to be even.

[<Diplomacy> has levelled up! <Diplomacy lv. 2 -> 3>]

It helped, even if just a little.

The fae tilted her head in a way that would have been charming on a less inhuman creature. "Vulnerable? What a strange way to say *compatible*," she said, wearing a wicked grin. "Walk with me."

Rather than providing a choice, though, Mercury felt the wood underneath him shift. That had not been a request. A small show of force, and a promise of greater harm applied should he decline. With a bit of reluctance in his stomach, he let the floor guide him, then walked alongside the fae.

"Are you here to speak with me on the behalf of court Blossom?" he asked.

Lady Whisperbloom laughed, a chiming, beautiful sound. "No, no. Blossom is... how do I say this? Perhaps... unorganized. Yes. My court is unorganized."

"I see," Mercury said simply, focussing on putting one foot in front of the other. "Then why do you speak to me?"

The lady smiled. "For fun," she said. Then remained silent, her gaze boring into him, beckoning him to speak, to continue this conversation.

He obliged, for now. "For fun?" Mercury asked.

"Indeed," lady Whisperbloom said with a smile, gesturing at the hall. "You see, this is a normal ball with people I have known for hundreds of chapters, and servants that have never mattered in all that time. Everyone here is cunning and dangerous, but they're not *new*. Unlike you, Mercury."

Yellow sap dribbled down from her cheek, impacting the floor and soaking into the wooden boards. Her hands, too long and too thin, snapped through the air. She gestured at the arena.

"Blood is spilt, but these fleshy nobodies will be stitched back together. New beasts will be found in the realm and sent here to be carved down. It is a mocking display of brutality, but it has lost all purpose. Why spill blood if nothing grows of it? No," she shook her head. "It is pointless."

Slowly her face turned, her silken robes shuffling. "The banquet... is full of delights, yet I have tasted them all. The hall is full of fae *yet I have tasted them all*. Anything here that is within my reach has already entertained me."

She paused, then drew in a long, longing breath of air. "I have no desire to revitalize old rivalries. No desire to dance with old destriers. No desire for any of it. Blossoming is about all the old breaking apart and leaving room for the *new*." She huffed. "I do not want stagnation. I can barely tolerate another second of boredom. So. My offer is simple. You can win my favour so very, unbelievably easily. *Entertain me, Mercury.*"

"Dance with me. Let our destinies entwine for a moment until fate inevitably rips us apart again. Let our union be sweet and our parting be full of pain and rage. I wish to *live*. It is that simple!!"

By the end of her speech, lady Whisperbloom was panting, a manic glint in her eye. She was drooling sap from both sides of her mouth, and Mercury could see that her... shell, as they were called, was clearly under the effects of some psychedelics. He could tell that something new was rare in these realms, and that the simple thought of something new made her desires boil and bubble.

In fact, he could tell more gazes were upon him now. More fae from the court of Blossom he guessed, their eyes locked onto him. But they were weak.

He could see it all, after all.

Their auras were wispy breezes, all of them, but that of lady Whisperbloom was different. It was solid, ancient, one full of desire and power and long buried fury. Should he risk an interaction?

A glance at Arber told him there was little choice. Of course, he could refuse but... to refuse spring was a transgression, at the end. He read Arber's subtle fluctuations. Their connection was stronger now, and Mercury could tell. Feel the precipice of growth tugging on <Grass>.

He could almost read the tree's thoughts. It was unwise to refuse the court of Blossom. Instead, it was best to keep new experience hidden away, sheltered, tantalizing secrets to manipulate and string along. The dance with spring was cruel and dangerous, since the fae of Blossom were unforgiving and ravenous.

Pull too much, and you would be devoured whole. Give too little, and you would be devoured whole. It was safest to not draw their eyes at all, but not drawing their eyes meant stagnation, and stagnation was something Mercury simply could not afford.

A small sigh escaped his lips. "Lady Whisperbloom," he spoke. The words came slowly, yet the fae's attention snapped onto him like a predator locking onto prey. Her pupils were thin, barely visible against the bright yellow-white of her eyes.

She was holding her breath, awaiting his answer.

"My current shell may be inadequate for a true, physical dance with you. But, perhaps, it can service to spill a secret or two."

Instantly, her attention was even more rapt. He could see her spine curl, her face bending lower, closer to his. The sap leaking from her mouth grew radiant, not simply orange but glimmering. She was hungry, so desperately hungry. *Starving*.

Mercury knew he had to make an impression that lasted. So, what could he afford to let them know? What secrets could he keep? Ihn'ar had to remain secret. Its name, its origin, all of that. But they knew about his dreamscape, so certainly they knew of the concept of dreamweaving. Perhaps, then something from that language?

Something about himself. To make him seem more dangerous, more worthwhile to keep around, to keep as an ally. He had it.

"You see, Mercury is only one of my names. I granted this one to myself. However, perhaps to you, another alias could be more tasteful?" The word, alias, was another one of those words that slammed into reality. The system was powerful here, too.

"I am, after all, Yr'Enzel as much as I am Mercury."

His declaration slammed into reality even harder than the concept of Hospitality.