

Chapter 197: The Faerie Courts

Walking into the large ballroom, Mercury was rather unsurprised to see it having changed. Rather than a stairway to the second story, it was shaped more like an amphitheatre. There was a single stairwell, seemingly able to rotate, placed in the centre, so that whatever ruler of the courts was needed could stride down from their elevated throne and make their way down to the plebians.

Where the second story used to be, there was a set of unbelievably opulent chairs. In alignment with the cardinal directions were the thrones for the seasonal courts. Blossom, Chill, Scorch, and Mellow, for spring, winter, summer, and autumn. There were other seats, in smaller intervals, but they were harder to identify.

The throne of Blossom, for example, was wreathed with green, flowering vines, dozens of petals sprouting from it, while the throne of Chill was carved from ice and snow. They were beautifully decorated, and clearly held together with magic.

Right now, the rulers of the courts were not yet present, but they would soon be. Mercury noted that these were distinctly *not* the empty thrones. These were the acknowledged, current rulers of the courts, rather than old, forgotten, supposedly dead fae who were still clinging to life.

Lady Whisperblossom had told him of those, and their deserted courts. Halls that were once opulent now standing empty. The courts that would attend today were still in the height of power, though some of them were dying out slowly.

“And you really can’t tell me what’ll happen today?” Mercury asked once again.

Arber looked at the room, slowly filling up with the fae. They came from different doorways, entering one by one, and beginning to mingle. “No,” they said. “It’s a sacred thing. I cannot tell you any of it.”

“More sacred than-”

“I can’t tell you about it,” Arber said, shaking their head. “No matter what you ask, I can’t tell you. This is taken seriously.”

Mercury grumbled, but relented. “Fiiiine,” he complained, setting about waiting instead.

Still, the mopaaw looked around the room. There were a few recesses cut into the floor, now. Shallow, with sloped edges, kind of like vats where small pools could go. Maybe half a metre deep, not much more.

Other than that, the room was rather bland. There were spots for the fae to stand, and dedicated ones for people who were not aligned with any court. That was where Mercury would stand himself, for example, as well as Alice and Arber. Asher would stand with Scorch, as was his duty.

Misha, too, had already arrived, standing with Chill, and Orvyn with Blossom. The shape-shifting heir was in a somewhat humanoid form, too, for once, though she seemed uncomfortable, scratching and having flakes of leaves fall loose, before getting swept back up into her shell again.

The morning continued on like that for a little while, with more fae trickling in, and taking their place. For once, maybe the first time since Mercury had entered this room, it was quiet. Some of the fae were talking to one another, but it happened in hushed whispers entirely. No one was speaking loudly anymore.

As the minutes ticked by, even those hushed whispers died out. A few more minutes, and absolute silence hung in the ballroom.

There was nothing much to see in the room. The staircase in its middle was frozen in time. The fae stood perfectly still, as if even shifting their weight on their feet might kill them. It was a perfectly still room,

Sparks danced in the air, as if showing the tension, but Mercury resisted the urge to push them away. Even as one landed on his fur and singed it slightly, he simply ignored it. None of that mattered.

Because, eventually, after a long moment of silence, the staircase in the middle of the room moved. It rotated, slowly, then quickly, then slowly again, before finally stopping.

When it did stop, the staircase led from the ground floor up to one of the thrones. This one, to Mercury, seemed rather comfortable, woven from white, fluffy clouds.

Arber spoke. "The first court to make an appearance today. The venerable court of Skye."

The words left their mouth, spoken without their usual accent, and the room collectively held their breath.

Mercury *felt* the arrival before he saw it. It was like something was drawing nearer at insane speeds, suddenly crashing into him. The mana vibrated in the air, and he felt pressure slam into his application of <Rainfall>, the one that kept him breathing clean air.

A palpable weight laid itself across the room, and Mercury could feel it on his shoulders, as if he was lifting a hundred kilos. It pressed down on him, as if attempting to force him to kneel.

Some of the fae did just that. Almost all that bowed were from the court of Skye, an admittedly modest ensemble, though some fae without a court at all did so, too. Of those aligned with other courts, none moved, and Mercury himself simply stood and watched.

It felt heavy, and the presence made his skin crawl. It felt like he was smelling ozone, combined with the distinct, burning feeling at the back of his throat. For a few seconds, nothing happened, other than the pressure growing more intense. Mercury felt his ears pop, as if he was in a plane that was taking off.

Then, the air in front of the staircase to the second floor rippled. First like it was in a heatwave, then, as if there was heavy wind blowing, and finally, the air filled with cracks looking a little like tiny, lightless lightning bolts, frozen in time.

A moment later it broke open, and the pressure coming from it washed out like a wave. Mercury felt his own <Rainfall> flicker like a candle caught in a storm. He instantly focused his entire attention on simply remaining upright.

The pressure crashed into his lungs, almost sending him into a coughing fit, but he resisted. His Skills worked in tandem to resist the enforcement. Mercury's eyes danced across the rooms, watching a few more fae buckle, and bend a knee, even though they seemed less than pleased.

None of the older faeries did so, and Mercury also remained standing, if barely.

From the torn air, a figure stepped into the room. It was as though someone had taken a stormcloud and pressed it, vaguely, into the shape of a person. Their arms, all eight of them, were spindly and branching, as if made from lightning. Their dark shape was shifting, if clinging to a somewhat humanoid form, and they had an enormous mane of hair.

Flashes of light seemed to occasionally occur within the court ruler, their dark, grey shape suddenly being illuminated to stark white. It felt like the room lost a bit of vibrancy and colour, as if the greyscale of a thunderstorm was being imposed on the whole world.

Mercury even felt his fur rising with the static electricity. It was a thoroughly uncomfortable experience.

For a minute, the ruler of Skye simply swept their eyes across all the fae that were present. Eventually, that gaze set on Mercury.

They had eyes, yes. He could tell, now. Looking into them felt as if he was staring into the sky, dozens upon dozens of clouds storming by in the wind, as if there was an endless sea of storms.

He held it for a few seconds, as the court ruler regarded him. The pressure grew heavier, and he felt his legs shaking, but still remained standing. Eventually, after what felt like an eternity, but was probably only a few seconds, the creature moved on.

Another dozen seconds passed as they finished gazing at the fae in presence, then ascended the stairs up to the throne.

Mercury spent the moment of calm throwing a resentful glare at Arber. This was going to be a hellish day if every one of those damned rulers made an entrance like that. And, of course, he hadn't been warned.

There was a lull in the air for a bit, as the ruler of Skye withdrew their presence. A collective sigh was released.

Then, Arber spoke again.

“The second court to make an appearance today. The venerable court of Salt.”

Slowly, the staircase moved clockwise, stopping at the next throne.

Instantly, that same feeling of pressure returned, no less intense. This time it smelt watery, like a faint ocean breeze. Except that the ocean breeze was whipping against his face intensely enough to make his eyes tear up and his skin feel dry. The same scene repeated, with him gritting his teeth to resist the pressure, though it was slightly less miserable, since <Adaptable> had already changed him slightly.

When the air fractured again, Mercury felt that wind redouble. He was almost torn off the floor, having to intensify his muscle mass and make himself heavier to remain grounded. <Itinerant> and <Unrestrained> were acting almost like a windshield, breaking the breeze before it hit him.

A few moments later, the air fractured, and the pressure this time was worse. With Skye it felt like his ears popped because of a flight. Now, it felt as if someone had thrown him into the depths of the ocean.

The pressure felt strong enough to begin grinding against his bones. It felt like a raging torrent blasting into him from all directions. He tasted salt as he breathed in, and it burnt his nose and eyes from the sensation.

Fucking faeries.

The thing that stepped out was a large creature. It looked like the union between a centipede and a whale, with chitinous lines that could almost be described as graceful, as well as dozens of legs that seemed like they could extend fins to glide through the water.

Its exoskeleton was made from salt, the crystals somehow sticking together, despite the fact that parts of the creature also seemed to be made from dark, churning water, and seafoam. It, too, looked over the crowd, and when it stared at Mercury, it felt like he was being hit by a high pressure jet of water, but soon, it moved on and walked up to the throne, curling around the pillar-like structure.

The staircase moved. It stopped at the throne of ice.

Arber spoke.

“The third court to make an appearance today. The venerable court of Chill.”

Instantly, the temperature in the room dropped. Mercury saw his breath come out in puffs of smoke. His fur became thicker, but it wasn't enough to stave off the cold - it would never be.

Mercury, briefly, considered that the fae were being rather dramatic. Irrithuriel, despite her main element being ice and snow, had not been this intense about it. Of course, that didn't make his current predicament even slightly better.

The ruler of chill entered, and the temperature dropped even further. Mercury stopped shaking, as he felt the blood in his veins borderline freeze. He grit his teeth, and willed his heart to continue beating. The pain was only mildly horrible.

He felt the chill crawl through him, but he remained standing anyway. More fae than for the other two courts buckled, bending their legs. Misha of Chill remained smiling, even as his ruler entered.

Mercury saw the ruler. It was a crystal core, a deep, icy blue. It sprouted dozens of insect-like wings, terribly thin constructions of translucent ice, in all sorts of pastel colours, with mesmerizing patterns carved into them.

Eyes, too, were drawn onto the wings, which extended in every direction, and the eyes moved, too. A little like a peacocks's feathers, except just... real eyes.

With those, the ruler of Chill laid their eyes on everyone in the room almost simultaneously. The pressure got worse once more. Mercury felt as if he was breathing shards of ice. Like his blood was crystallizing and cutting his insides open. Still, he didn't look down. He didn't bend, didn't break, didn't relent.

It was like weathering a snowstorm with his bare skin, the winds like a whip, and icy little flakes digging into him like thousands of tiny needles.

He didn't avert his gaze for a moment.

Eventually, the ruler of Chill relented. The eyes moved on, and eventually, the crystal like core floated up a bit higher, ascending up to the icy throne.

Since the seasonal courts were in the cardinal directions, there were now two other courts before he needed to deal with the next season. Not that it would be much more pleasant in the meantime.

"The fourth court to make an appearance today. The venerable court of Shadow."

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"The fifth court to make an appearance today. The venerable court of Rust."

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After Rust came Mellow, and with Mellow, their ruler.

Mercury hadn't been told their names, though he was sure they had them. But for Mellow... Alice whispered the name to him.

"Hey, you know how Mellow is a decaying court? This is the reason why they have not yet died out. The ruler of Mellow... is faerie king Oberon."

The warning did not come a moment too soon. As soon as Mellow was even named, the pressure filling the room eclipsed any that came before.

Mercury saw faeries that had remained standing strong bend their knees. Asher himself crashed to the ground on one knee. Misha of Chill barely remained standing, the grin finally wiped from their face.

One by one, the fae fell like dominos. One by one, they crashed to the ground, no matter what court they belonged to. Mercury even saw lady Witness briefly wobble before she caught herself.

Every thought vanished from his mind as he focused on remaining upright. His legs creaked under the pressure, his bones threatening to snap. Mercury forcefully held them in place, using his rijn and <Force of the Hecatoncheires> to hold himself in place.

The assault was on all his senses. The pressure was intense enough to make his vision go blurry. The walls seemed to fade. Every cell of his body started becoming convinced that he stood in an autumn forest.

It was, in every meaning of the word, *mellow*. Brutally so. The entire world seemed to demand he become mellow, too. Bend like a wilting leaf, and take his place upon the ground. Mercury had to strain every fibre of his being to resist that though.

His other ystirs woke up, and he even felt Appy use her system clearance in order to reduce the mental interference. Despite it all, Mercury stood <Unbroken>.

Then, the air broke and the faerie king actually stepped through.

[Your Willpower has increased by 1!]

[<Unbroken> has levelled up! <Unbroken lv. 6 -> 7>]

The pressure was nothing short of *crushing*. Even more fae dropped to the ground, including Misha and Orvyn. The heir of Shadow, who Mercury had bested, had already fallen, and now became borderline flattened to the ground.

Oberon was... a simple looking man. He wore a garment of browning leaves, though some green, yellow, and red ones were mixed in. It formed a deceptively simple tunic. His crown was woven from vines, with a handful of juniper berries blossoming from it. He sported a small pair of curling horns, somewhere between antlers and ram's horns. The bits of skin Mercury saw were grey and flakey, like scales about to fall off.

His face was covered in a white mask, its colour almost matching his silver hair. The mask was an opaque, milky colour, somewhere between white jade and ivory. Its edges turned into feather-like designs, while its top flowed into the leaf-crown effortlessly.

From in between that white, Mercury saw the king's eyes. They were a burning yellow, the colour of a burning sunset. One by one, Oberon gazed at the present fae.

One by one, they buckled, then kneeled.

Until, someone didn't.

Oberon had begun by staring at the court of Blossom, and the people he looked at folded. One after another. Until his eyes landed on lady Whisperblossom.

Mercury saw her shake, but she held the king's eyes, despite everything. After an endless moment, Oberon moved on.

Court by court he went, and every time, Mercury saw one, maybe two people resisting his gaze. Out of the hundreds of fae present, at the end, less than two dozen had resisted the king's gaze.

Then, it settled on those not belonging to a court. Each and every one of them buckled. Then, Oberon's gaze landed on Arber. Mercury saw the tree avatar consider fighting, but they didn't.

Arber bowed. They didn't kneel, or prostrate themselves, but simply gave a bow at the hip. Oberon seemed satisfied at that, moving on.

His gaze landed on Alice. Mercury saw the smile fade from his companion's face. But she stood. Didn't move a muscle.

Oberon looked at Mercury.

Instantly, Mercury felt as though the weight of the world settled on him. He was like wheat, and the intent of the faerie king like the scythe of the farmer. He was a loose pile of dust in front of a tornado. The gulf between them was vast.

Mercury felt his ystirs tremble, then crumble. His mind snapped together, into one consolidated force, and he held on as best as he could.

[<Unrestrained> has levelled up! <Unrestrained lv. 5 -> 6>]

Almost on reflex, Mercury sunk into ihn'ar.

It was entirely unreasonable for him to remain standing.

The golden veil shattered.

Suddenly... it didn't seem so unreasonable anymore. But realistic?

The iridescent veil shattered.

Mercury saw the fake world come apart at its seams. The forced autumn conjured by the faerie king... Was just that. A false image.

Surrendering some Skills to Appy, she kept him upright with <Force of the Hecatoncheires>. He, instead, focused on keeping the faerie king's gaze.

Those eyes were mesmerizingly terrifying. He could glimpse so much in them. Mellowness, kindness, betrayal, a thousand lifetimes... it threatened to overwhelm Mercury, to consume him.

[Your Willpower has increased by 2!]

Mercury had had his mind shattered before. He'd broken apart himself in the realm of the crimson sun. He had partway broken again against the empty throne. He refused to lose himself again.

That was who he was. Mercury <Rainfall> Starlight.

And what he glimpsed of Oberon... was fascinating, entirely overwhelming, and again too much for him to parse... but it was just *noise*. It was mellow noise. He would never bend to that.

[<Unbroken> has levelled up! <Unbroken lv. 7 -> 8>]

Oberon's gaze moved on, and Mercury breathed a deep breath.

'Holy fuck,' he thought.

That had been dangerous. His entirely self had almost been twisted to bend. The fae across the room now stared at him, confused. He should, reasonably, not have been able to do so. Hewould've fallen, were it not for Appy's help. He could feel hairline fractures in his bones healing.

It had taken that much strength just to keep his body upright. But he'd remained standing.

[<Adaptable> has levelled up! <Unbroken lv. 7 -> 8>]

The sensation had been horrible, but... at the same time... 'Appy, did you record that sensation?'

[Sensation recorded. Partial repetition possible using <Training Weights>.]

While Oberon walked up the stairs, Mercury broke out into a faint smile. This was good. He'd found a new way to make his life miserable and grow from it.

He looked around, and saw a wide grin on Alice's face. Arber didn't have a face, but nevertheless, Mercury knew they were happy for him too. Asher, Misha, and Orvyn simply looked shocked, while lady Whisperblossom looked terribly entertained.

Oberon got settled on his throne, a solid one carved from an enormous, dark brown tree, wreathed with colourful leaves, and then Arber spoke again.

"The seventh court to make an appearance today. The venerable court of Illusion."

That one passed more easily. Mercury's frayed mind held together against illusions, and he was skilled at resisting the unreal, since reality itself seemed unreal to him sometimes. He held the world together, and remained himself.

"The eight court to make an appearance today. The venerable court of Dust."

When the announcement came, with it there was the smell of ash, the same kind of sooty smell Mercury remembered from burnt out campfires. But the pressure felt softened after his Skills levelled, and <Adaptable> made him temporarily more resistant.

When the air fractured again, Mercury felt warmth slam into him, too. Like he was looking at smouldering embers. The figure that appeared was decidedly not humanoid, this time, shifting constantly rather than retaining a single shape.

They were a light grey, only a few steps off white, made from thousands of floating bits of ash. Still, Mercury could tell that wasn't all that was to them. It felt as if there was enough ash in front of him to drown out a whole world. Almost enough ash to cover the ashen plains back in the crimson court.

A dense ball of condensed power, threatening to spill forth, restrained only by the person holding it.

As always, the ruler of Dust gazed around, though hardly anyone buckled under their gaze. Somehow, that felt strange to Mercury. Their aura was vast, yet... it seemed to not truly slam into someone.

Eventually, that gaze rested upon him, and Mercury saw it.

It wasn't ash "like" in the realm of the crimson sun.

The ruler of the court of Dust... was the reason for that ash there. The permanent storm, the fields covered in desolation, the broken court of the crimson sun... This one had done that.

Mercury triggered <Seeker of Secrets>.

[Once upon a time, a scion of Dust loved a lady of wrath. She drew him away, and Dust watched their scion go. When they did not return, Dust went to investigate, but nothing but a defiled corpse remained. That day, the embers within ash ignited once, and the land of the crimson sun was never the same. Only a handful of the court remained, left to starve until the end of time.]

Dust's ruler lingered on Mercury.

He knew that they knew about the crimson sun inside him. The ruler saw his titles. Saw <Star Usurper>. There was a brief, terribly faint whisper from <Intuition>.

A complex emotion. Grief, anger, sadness, acceptance, some kind of joy it was done with, and pride, too. The ruler of Dust seemed not entirely themselves, but they moved on rather quickly afterwards.

Despite that, seeing them shook him more than Oberon, because with them, it was personal.

"What is the ruler of Dust called?" he asked Alice.

The hero regarded him softly for a bit, then whispered back. "Finva."

With a nod, Mercury let the next court entry wash over him.

“The ninth court to make an appearance today. The venerable court of Scorch.”

It came with a heavy presence again. The ruler of Illusion had been a will ‘o wisp looking thing, but the ruler of Scorch was far hotter. It was a figure of entirely, iridescent white. Looking at it felt like staring at the sun.

Just its presence made his eyes hurt, but Mercury still didn’t avert them. The creature was not quite humanoid, either. It somewhat held that shape, but rather than arms, birdlike wings of radiance spread from their shoulders. They wrapped those around themselves, almost as though it was a cocoon.

Their head, too, was not humanoid at all. It was fully detached from the remainder of their body, a floating orb like a second sun itself, and they had no legs. Their cocoon torso was instead held up by a swirling conflagration or flaming tendrils.

When they moved, they left streaks of fire and plasma hanging in the air briefly, before they dimmed and let down.

Mercury stood.

“The tenth court to make an appearance today. The venerable court of Blood.”

It was hardly worth mentioning, but he withstood it.

“The eleventh court to make an appearance today. The venerable court of Allure.”

This time, he got angry. For a brief moment, that faerie forced a false image of Zyl into his mind.

Mercury decided he did not like Allure.

Still, it was only a footnote, really. Because the next court that came, was...

“The final court to make an appearance today. The venerable court of Blossom.”

Alice lowered herself to him again. “Blossom is ruled by faerie queen Titania.”

The air fractured once again. And a presence descended.

This one was comparable to Oberon once more. The air was charged by now, all the rulers were present, and only Titania still absent. So her presence felt even heavier, pressing against all the others.

It was a calm spring day, only turned up to a million. The smell of flowers was entirely overwhelming, and all Mercury could hear was the buzzing of insects. It was an unnatural, horribly intense vibrancy of life, intense enough to send his own heart pumping faster.

When Titania stepped through, for the second time that day, Mercury's mind was forced into a single shape, resisting with all his mind, forced to peer past the seams of what was real in order to escape the fake world the queen's presence imposed on him.

He bore with it, watching lady Whisperblossom kneel, and lady Witness stand even under the queen's gaze. When her eyes landed on Arber, he bowed. Alice stood.

Eventually, she turned to Mercury, and he finally took her in. Her hair was raven black, with flowers interwoven all throughout it, her skin a toned brown. She had two long, ashen grey horns that seemed to twist in on themselves.

Her dress was made from leaves and flowers, stained all kinds of colours. And her eyes were a vibrant, bright magenta, And seemed to leave trails of magenta flames when she looked around, her lips eternally frozen in a bright smile.

The pressure was different from Oberon, but no less intense. Mercury felt himself begin unravelling, then held himself together forcefully. Instead of unravelling, he unravelled.

Spring itself opened up in front of him. The name of every flower, every tree, every mushroom, every day. The name of the air and the pollen and the-

Titania looked away. Triumphant, Mercury stood on shaky legs. He had done it. He had remained standing throughout it all.

[Level Up!]

[Level Up!]

With the levels, all his aches faded away. Mercury felt amazing.

That didn't mean he was more powerful than all the fae. There were about two dozen that had done the same, and the ruler themselves, of course. Additionally, another couple dozen who had kneeled could probably kill him if they tried.

But his Willpower was greater. In fact, all twenty points his two levels granted him went into Willpower.

Willpower 216 -> 236

He had shown each and every damn fae in presence that he could butt heads with the best of them. His Skills now stood on the very verge of evolution, only needing a slight push, and he had the perfect means to practice them.

Silence hung in the room, though, demanding his attention, and he quickly wiped away the smile, focussing again.

For the first time since the introduction of the courts, someone other than Arber spoke. Titania, sitting on her throne of leaves and flowers, opened her ever-smiling mouth.

“Welcome, one and all! Dear faeries of the courts, unaffiliated fae, and esteemed guests. Welcome to our inauguration ceremony!!” she said, her voice a melodious sing-song.

What was an inauguration ceremony?

“On this wonderful day, all in attendance will be granted the chance to affiliate themselves with a court,” Oberon spoke. His voice was deep, melodious and, well... mellow. “Those who wish to change their court may do so, those who wish to stay unaffiliated may do so by passing a trial of the courts’ choice.”

Mercury looked at Arber. The avatar looked back, giving him the tiniest of nods. He would also need to participate in the trial if he didn’t want to be part of one of the courts.

Lovely.