

Chapter 215: A leaf in the Wind

Time passed. Despite everything, despite the work to do, despite the fact that Mercury knew the fae realm was struggling, he didn't rush.

There would have been no point. In order to find out the rulers' names, he would need to spend time with them, anyway. It wasn't like he could conveniently kill them to see it on a sheet. It was no longer logged on their own statuses, either.

How strangely that worked. Did the system display one's own perception to the self? Did it keep records of what one's last used name was? There was no answer for that. But since fae magic often affected names, and their very nature was dependent on them, Mercury imagined that they were perhaps treated a little differently from the rest of the population.

For his own part, after the long meeting with the rulers, Mercury first went to sleep. He didn't strictly *need* to, not at all anymore. His <Oceanic Consciousness> had eliminated the need - but the rate at which resting restored mental energy was still much higher, which also led to greater time compression in his mindscape.

By now, when he slept for eight hours, about twice that time passed in his mind. And he could still call up all three of his zeyjn. But he didn't. Not that first night.

'Hello, old Uunrahzil,' he greeted his friend and teacher.

The construct of grey mana veins shifted, turning to face him. Dreamweaver still had no face, instead looking more like an animated cardiovascular system.

But that didn't matter at all.

Mercury felt the warmth radiating off them. Gratitude, pride, satisfaction, happiness, and purpose. 'Ah, Mercury,' they greeted him. 'Aneth'bar. Thank you.'

'Of course,' the mopaaw replied. 'I am glad you are better.'

Old Uunrahzil radiated soft amusement at that. 'Better?' they mused. 'An insufficient description. I am more than I have been in eons.'

'More?' Mercury asked.

'Indeed,' Dreamweaver replied. 'This one does eyeun. Your tenacious will has once more changed us. Solidified us further.'

Lightly, the student shook his head at the teacher. 'Please. Explain from the beginning?'

Once more, he could read some faint humor, subtle underneath the existential satisfaction that generally surrounded old Uunrahzil. 'Certainly,' they started. 'One of the thrones witnessed this one. Yearning.'

‘Yes. You have a connection to the fae?’

The construct made from grey shifted again. ‘Somewhat,’ they replied tentatively. ‘We interact, as much as any similar creatures do. My connection to the fae is alike to your connection to the kin. Easily mistaken for another, yet distinctly different.’

Mh. That made sense, Mercury got that. Similarly to the fae, Dreamweaver seemed somewhat reliant on how others saw them. They also existed in their own realm. But there were differences, too. He waited for them to continue.

‘For one, my people were perfectly capable of lying, yet dislike deceit. The fair folk have made a culture of deceit without spoken untruths. Such and similar things set us apart. Yet, we interacted, from time to time.

‘Both my people and the fae, after all, live in other realms than the material one. Interfacing with one another was important. Communicating about maintaining what we had mattered. So, I interacted with some of the older fae.

‘However, I am no longer who I was back then. No longer a warrior against the void, no longer a guardian. Being called by my warrior name when I am a teacher by all means? My fractured self splintered further.

‘And then, you, Yr’enzel.’ They thought the name with so much fondness; care the likes of which Mercury had known few people capable of giving. ‘You save this one again. Drag us back from the edge of <Nothingness>, allow us back into your sanctuary. We owe you our life, now. Our very existence. We are grateful, and in that gratitude, all of my fractured selves stand united.’

Mercury dipped his head in acknowledgement. He wanted to say that it was no problem or that he didn’t mind, but he knew it would be insulting. Old Uunrahzil was taking this debt seriously, and so he would show it the respect it deserved. ‘I accept your gratitude.’

‘For that, too, we thank you,’ Uunrahzil intoned. ‘If you do not mind telling us, how did you bring this one back?’

Once more, Mercury retold the story of defeating Yearning, though in less detail. ‘There was decay at the courts. I was filled with rage at who hurt you, so I sought them out to unmake them.’

‘Your care is appreciated, your fury dangerous to yourself.’

‘Such is life,’ Mercury replied without batting an eye. He would accept their concern, but he stood by his decisions, reckless and emotional they may be. They understood. ‘I was angry, and so I acted to change the fate that had befallen you. Since I imagined it to be linked to how they perceive you, breaking the one imposing that perception should suffice.’

‘And so you did.’

Mercury nodded. ‘So I did, but it went a little differently.’

'Oh?' old Uunrahzil asked, curiosity pouring off them now.

'I was, of course, toyed with by the fae some more. An intriguing toy, to them.' The words came out with all the frustration the situation had caused him.

Dreamweaver mimicked a nod in acknowledgement. 'Rarely will there be people who do not break against the faeries' machinations. You are exceptional for that, too.'

A faint smile played on Mercury's astral lips at the praise. 'So it seems. I rose to every challenge presented. Bargained, created alliances. And I traded in favours, until I finally found the one who did this to you with some help.'

'Then you unmade them?' They thought it with some curiosity, but also some amount of apprehension.

'Almost,' Mercury replied. 'I saw it through to the end. Until they were dead, yes. But then I, too, died, with the weight of a whole world crashing in on me. So, I used the rewards from this fight to become stronger, and some more rewards in order to turn back time and try again. I knew their name from the message, had seen the fae's core before...

'So I declined their nature.'

The words hung in the air for a few seconds, before Mercury continued. 'Yearning was the throne that harmed you. A twisted version of want, so I changed it. Took away the desire towards ownership. It counted as unmaking Yearning, yes. But with it, Appreciation was born. I used the rewards, that time, on restoring you.'

With that, the story was finished, and old Dreamweaver silently watched as a few more seconds passed by. They seemed in thought, and Mercury let them think.

'Such a reward spent on this one,' they mused. 'We thank you. This one witnesses your mercy, and wishes to praise you for it, too. Changing the courts... what an outrageous thing.' They seemed amused. 'It suits you quite well.'

Mercury smirked, faintly. 'Do you consider me so outrageous?' he asked.

Slow waves of affirmation rolled off the teacher. 'Quite,' Dreamweaver replied simply.

The mopaaw laughed a little. 'Haha, well. I suppose that can't be helped.'

'Indeed,' old Uunrahzil replied sagely. 'Not when you grow your sanctuary this much, so quickly.'

And for the first time, Mercury really took the time to look around. His inner world had, as expected, changed quite a bit. It was far vaster, despite the grass plains stretching on as far as he could see before.

The first and largest change was the sky. It was a patchwork, and more bits of colour were added. Pure white, dull grey, as well as bits of blue and amber. Mercury sometimes thought

he saw faint pinpricks of light up there, but no true stars yet - other than Whisperstar, of course.

His silver sun, too, was different. Instead of growing larger, it had actually shrunk. More threads seemed to constitute it, and the pressure seemed to have made it denser. His bonded items orbited it gently, hovering in his soul space, and he could see tethers forming between it and other items he wore.

Bonds were something he did not yet fully understand, but he knew that this stellar body held the answers. One day soon, he'd unlock its secrets.

But for now, Mercury focused on the nexus that allowed his inner world far more stability. When he had accepted more threads into it, the object had proven its true worth. Without the nexus, Mercury knew that the weight may have flattened him into a pancake.

Now, it hung in the sky, threads of the weave wrapped around and across it from all directions. It was wonderful, like strands of silk dancing in moonlight. The nexus held it together, made it more permanent. Kept it solid, even when changes occurred.

And with all the recent changes to his inner world, it certainly held a lot of conceptual weight. Mercury still felt it as a dull pressure against his ever growing spirit. But it was at no risk of breaking, not at all.

Instead, it now held all of those vistas that Yearning had captured. Distant waterfalls. Shores at eternal sunset. Plains, and jungles of joy. And, of course, Kim, the remains of the creatures of the world of Joy, was there too. The small caterpillar was busy chewing on some of the crystalline, shimmering rainbow grass.

Though that was not all. They had been busy constructing a garden, as they said they wanted to. There were some trees Mercury didn't even recognize, as well as some that he did. Oaks, birches, acorns, chestnuts, that kinda deal. Some of the new ones seemed taller, wilder, but still tamed.

Gentle shade was cast from the colourful trees, onto a few fields of crops. Carrots poked out of the ground, and there was a field of something Mercury recognized as... oh, that was catnip. He felt a tiny hint of dizziness looking at it, but with his willpower, it was easy to move on without falling to temptation.

Instead, he focused on what he and Kim had called the 'Pride Flag Project'. Indeed, there were already flowers of different colours growing.

'We got a crossbreeding project running, Boss,' Kim explained when they noticed that his attention focused on them. 'Slowly expanding our roster of flower colours. Going a lil' slow, but we gots this. Would ya mind introducin' us to the big lug?' Somehow, Mercury got the idea that they were indicating towards old Uunrahzil.

The ancient one regarded the strange chimeric aberration with a curious look. 'It appears you have acquired a first resident, Yr'enzel. How peculiar,' they hummed. 'I suppose this one should introduce themselves. We are old Dreamweaver. We are Mercury's tri'ht. Learning partner. Teacher and also student.'

'Gotcha,' Kim replied, shooting a catty grin from a relaxed pose. 'I'm the gardener of this place. Got some world management privileges pending for approval, but since we're part of the whole nexus thing it's been going lax with the restrictions.'

'Oh, let me get on that,' Mercury quickly replied. He found pending request for medium reshaping privileges, and minor weather manipulation privileges, both of which he promptly approved.

'Trita,' Kim laughed. 'Thanks, Boss. That was fast. Glad you're not dead. Though, uh, where'd ya take all the extra space from?'

Mercury smiled a little. 'Well, you heard me explain it to old Dreamweaver just now, did you not? I simply took over Yearning's realm while reshaping them.'

'Holy feck,' Kim spat. 'That's filthy. Disgusting. What the actual hell kinda power is that? Monster. Slash positive. I'm complimenting you.'

The thoughts were articulated in a single stream of consciousness, telling Mercury that they genuinely were just that shocked at his feat. Combined with their attempt at clearly communicating their intent, it made it almost funny. He let out a soft chuckle.

'I'm glad, I suppose,' he thought, 'that you aren't disgusted by me over this.'

Kim gave a soft shrug at this - Mercury had no idea how they did so without arms, but they conveyed the gesture nonetheless. Some kind of communication Skill maybe? 'I wouldn't ever, really. We owe ya a life debt. And you've been treatin' us nothing but well. So it's really in our interest that you stay alive 'n kicking, Boss.'

Mercury just smiled at them. Then he looked at old Uunrahzil again. 'Now you know everything that happened. What is next?'

The ancient creature radiated soft amusement, but also rumination. 'I suppose this one will work on mending oneself. We are closer than ever before now. It is pleasant. As for you, Yr'enzel... I believe there is a saying in your language. "The world is your oyster." This sanctuary of yours seems to work very literally with this idea. It is your world. And may be altered to suit your needs.'

Pausing, they looked around. 'You have grown it marvellously. You will grow it more. I am proud of you, mine tri'ht, to call you a worldweaver. A dreamweaver. A Star of Hope.' Their strange form twisted in an approximation of a smile. 'You know your path, Yr'enzel. You know your names. Now learn what they mean to you. Learn about the <Dreamweave>, learn about <Nothingness> and the void, learn about the veils in ihn'ar. There are more for you to shatter, after all.'

Mercury shook his head slightly. 'I suppose it was a silly question.'

'So it would seem,' old Uunrahzil replied, though their words were without any sting.

And it was true. Mercury had a myriad of things to do next. To practice and improve. Runecarving, smithing, weaving, his different magics. Fixing the different fae rulers,

expanding his inner world, managing it properly, allowing his nexus to rank up some more. Growing his items, bonding his shawl and his trusty cloak. More zeyjn, more ystirs, training his rijn further...

Looking at all the projects, it felt like the longer he lived the more things there were to do for him. What a strange feeling. Long ago, those choices may have once paralysed him, but now they no longer did so. Because he knew that all of them were valid. All of them would let him find himself some more.

All of them would bring him some fulfillment.

Because, above all, he truly loved them.

Every moment spent smithing, spent carving, spent doing magic was one he enjoyed. One he felt he was realizing himself, improving his very foundations. With his Skills and levels, it felt like he was no longer running out of time, either.

He felt free. And that was amazing.

So, what Mercury did with that freedom... was summon up his log. He walked into the expanded space inside, into little pandora - the portable smithy Yasashiku had gifted him - and set about using all his enormous focus, willpower and talent on making some more nails.

- - -

[<Apprentice Crafting> has levelled up! <Apprentice Crafting lv. 3 -> 5>]

Five days later, when half a Page had passed, Mercury eventually returned to the fae realm. Before that, he had once again taken an extended stay in Stormbraver. Daryel and Itsu had wanted to know where he lived, too, so they could occasionally visit.

Introducing them to Zyl had been rather lovely. They had tea and cake together, which Itsu found especially delightful. It seemed the kitsune had a sweet tooth. So, when Avery brought by some raisin bread, the two became swift friends.

And so it came about that Daryel placed a gravitational anchor near Stormbraver, which would let her rather quickly appear there should the need arise. Magic was, after all, wonderful.

Of course, when that much mana was released, Esmeya of the Mages' Guild also visited. She seemed rather shocked at seeing Daryel, who was, according to her, a well known member of the guild.

In fact, with her prowess, she could be higher among the leading echelons, but she was known to be something of a recluse. The two women seemed rather enamoured with the idea of exchanging ideas. Esmeya showing off her new inventions, while Daryel theorized on ways to improve them.

The runic chalk, especially, fascinated the older woman, and she was delighted to acquire a few more samples of it to do some tests on. Mercury had mainly seen her cast gravity based spells, but Daryel was also rather well-versed in spatial manipulation and ritual magic.

She was truly a powerful mage. And Mercury was glad to know her if ever he needed her help. She also showed him the house she and Itsu usually lived. A cottage by a pond; the same pond that Itsu had awakened as a Fox spirit on.

Its water was gorgeous. Faint ripples on it sparkled in the sunlight, as more water splashed into it from a small creek. Mercury drank some and it was delicious. River would have loved it, too. He wanted to take him there sometime, but that could wait a little, too.

For now, he was happy to mark the location with <Seeker of Secrets>, knowing where it laid. Apparently, it was in a region where using “qi” as a system resource was more common - a blend of mana and stamina that allowed for feats between magic and physicality. Mercury made a note to visit more later, when he set to exploring the continent, but for now it could wait.

Eventually, on his fifth day in Stormbraver, Alice visited too. She gave him a bright smile, and mercury returned it. She had helped him, and they had become friends. Mercury knew how her Skill worked, but since the gratitude he felt towards her was genuine, he hoped his gift would still be recognized by it.

Mercury had made her a necklace. It was a simple thing, made from copper that shone in a rather pretty orange colour. Over time it might oxidize and turn blue, but that would be fine too. It sparkled in the sunlight as Alice put it around her neck. And then, <Kindness> took hold.

[Necklace from a friend: This necklace was gifted to a heroine by a friend. It shines in the sun, sparkling like a star. It will cool the user down like summer rain if it becomes too hot. Finally, it will allow the user to find their friend if they think of them.]

As with most Skills that allowed someone to find Mercury, he, too, was able to feel that tether with his mind. He reached out and plucked it, and the necklace rang with a faint, pleasant hum. It was a nice noise, and he was glad it had worked.

“Thank you,” Alice said plainly. “I will cherish it.”

“I know you will,” Mercury replied with a smile. “Now. Where will you go next?”

She tilted her head a little. “I would like to accompany you in the fae realm some more, if you’d allow it?” Her smile was a little awkward, as if expecting a rejection. “I know I’m trouble there, but-”

“Of course you can come along,” Mercury said with a smirk. “I don’t care what any of the fae think of you. We’re friends, and they need me. Feel free to use that little ability of mine as a shield for yourself.”

Alice just nodded, smiling genuinely, now. “Okay,” she said. She rubbed one of her eyes, and looked every bit the young heroine she set out into the world as.

Then, Mercury pulled out his astrally bonded key to the fae realm. "Shall we?"

"Okay."

The pair stepped through the portal.

Mercury, at the end of it, found himself back in the familiar hallways of pale wood. Soon, a mannequin shaped avatar with a large hat rose from the floor. Arber came to greet them.

"Welcome back, Mercury," they said, giving him a nod. "Reshaper of the courts, eh? Gonna cause another ruckus?" The tree took on a conspiratorial tone.

"Pffft. Well, I can hardly help it, Arber. There is so much work to be done, and so few people to do it."

"Right, right," the tree said. "Well, I'm excited to see how your current project will go. Realm trees like myself are rare. Seeing another one revitalized would be like returning one of my crewmates to me."

"I'll make sure to do it right, then," Mercury said. "I will try my best at least."

"That is good to hear. Want me to inform Mellow's envoy that you are ready to begin your trek through the realm?"

Mercury tilted his head slightly. "Almost. Anything I should still know?"

Arber gave a nod. "A few reminders. Only eat food when it is specifically presented and freely offered to you. With your newfound fame, there will be people trying to play complex tricks on you."

"I'll try not to fall for them."

"Good. Other than that, be wary of any confrontation. The wilds of the realm are treacherous. Beware when the ash rises like waves on a sea. Beware the sky darkening. Do not trust the silence," Arber told him.

Taking the warnings to heart, Mercury nodded again. "Understood. I'll do my best to be wary."

"Alright. You will do well, friend. If you ever are in desperate danger, invoke the queen's name. Blossom and Chill will protect you, it seems," the tree added.

"If push comes to shove, I can also call Zyl to help," Mercury replied.

"Just making sure you've got safe passage and smooth sailing ahead. Such is my part to play as retainer," they said.

"It is appreciated, Arber. Thank you."

They nodded. "I'll call the envoy now, then?"

"Please do."

Another few minutes passed, time which Mercury spent walking through the empty hallways of pale wood, while he practiced shaping his mana with his ystirs. They came into the large opening hall, then stepped out into the courtyard that Mercury had last seen when he left for the treasure hunt.

Mercury stumbled a little when he stepped onto the soft soil. A good chunk of his leg was still missing, though his knee was regrowing, letting him bend the prosthesis more easily. Unfortunately, that was not much help when he effectively rolled his ankle, but with <Soft Steps> he quickly caught himself.

Seeing the burnt trees and forest of ash was still a sombre sight. Something once grand so ruined. Decaying. Maybe, someday, he would like to see it bloom again. When the fae realm was a little less amoral.

Hopefully, that would be soon enough. Mercury took a deep breath, smelling the smoke and carbon in the air. Eternally burnt. He breathed out, and summoned a shroud of <Rainfall>, no longer needing the external air to breathe. It was, in some ways, safer this way.

He left the shroud thin enough that he'd still notice if any subtle smells were spreading, but solid enough that it would hold against poisons or dangerous substances.

Then, they simply waited. More minutes passed, until eventually, there was a soft breeze in the air. A single brown leaf touched upon the blackened, ash covered ground. Then it unfolded, like a crumpled piece of paper, until in front of Mercury there was a creature.

Mellow's envoy had a long, smooth tail, leaves simulating fur. Their chest was made from facsimile scales, and upon their dog-like head sat a pair of antlers. Their entire body seemed made from a sheet of translucent orange, with a faint storm of leaves inside. They bowed.

"Greetings. This one's name is Orin. I am to be the envoy with whom you interface during your repair duties."

Mercury nodded. "I am Mercury. I hope for your cooperation in my work."

"Of course," the envoy replied. "We will be sure to provide adequate compensation. I will also do my best to assure your safety. For this, we have been provided a minor artefact by our ruler, the faerie king."

The envoy reached into thin air, and plucked another leaf out of it, this one faintly yellowing at the tips, otherwise green. When they placed it on the ground, it, too, unfolded, this time into a chariot, pulled by two terrezays made from leaves.

"Please, Mercury. Alice. Step inside, and allow this one to bring you to the esteemed court of mellow," Orin the coachfae asked.

And so, they stepped into the carriage, waving Arber goodbye, and taking off for Mellow's broken tree.