

Chapter 196: Days going By

Daryel and Mercury were forced to watch three more hunts, two of which ended in blood, and one in the granting of a boon. It was a young adult, maybe in his mid twenties, who won, bloodied and bruised. He, an orc, asked to be granted power over the earth, and so he was to be taught some magic, then returned to Chronagen.

After those hunts were over, more minor ones happened, but the big spectacles were done. Mercury could leave. The winners would attend a ball later today, for their “sponsors” - the fae which had brought them - to show them off. It was altogether disgusting, especially since not all participants had come willingly, but it was to be done anyway.

Mercury, on the other hand, was now in Daryel’s room, granted to her by Arber, where they would talk. The others waited outside.

The old woman in front of him was clearly dangerous. <Intuition> told him so rather clearly, as well as the ease with which she had crushed that young faerie. They were inexperienced, sure, but Mercury didn’t think he could just have compressed their shell to a marble.

At the same time, though, <Intuition> told him he had nothing to fear. The woman held no hostility at all towards him. In fact, she seemed rather... peaceful? Yes, that was it. She was the opposite of whatever posed to strike was, perfectly placid, like a relaxing cat.

“So, Daryel,” Mercury started. It was the first few words that fell in the quiet room, and the old lady gave a nod at them. “You would... like my help, I suppose?”

She nodded once more. “Now, now,” she chided, despite her prior agreement. “There is a proper order to things. Let us keep to it. Come, I ask you to make tea for me.”

Mercury blinked at her once, in confusion. Despite that, he felt she was genuine. <Intuition> told him so. <Diplomacy> was urging him to just make the dang tea.

Since there seemed to be little harm in it, Mercury tentatively nodded. “Sure, I suppose.”

Once again, Daryel nodded, then waved her hand over the table. From her inventory appeared two cups, as well as a teapot. That was all she brought out, however. No leaves, no water. Gently, she smiled. “Go on,” she coaxed. “Make tea.”

Ah, so it was a test. Mercury knew that there was water in the other room, but that was rather simple. “What would you like me to do?”

“Make tea,” she repeated.

“What kind?”

“Your kind,” the woman said with a smile.

Right then, Mercury supposed he *could* do that.

With a delicate use of <Force of the Hecatoncheires>, he took the lid off the teapot. Then, with a twist on <Rainfall> and <Water>, he made a tiny cloud rain silvery liquid into the pot. It was still water, though it certainly had a slight sheen to it.

Next, he needed leaves. Tea was made from leaves, surely. Of course, he could ask Arber to produce some, but would that really be *his* at all? It didn't feel right. He honestly didn't want to use anything from the fae realm at all.

That only really left two options. Maybe his log could grow something, if he really tried, or he could try bringing some from his dream realm... by weaving it into existence. Something symbolic there about his past and present, maybe? He was willing to try it.

Under the watchful gaze of Daryel, he took out his log from his inventory. The woman raised an eyebrow at that, but remained silent.

Of course, the log was dead. It was wood that had fallen over, and not absorbed nutrients from the ground for a while. Having it sprout grass of all things... well, it made rather little sense.

Luckily, Mercury wasn't exactly bound by reason.

Very quickly, with a shift of his mind that came effortlessly now, he twisted past the golden veil of "reason". Suddenly, the idea of grass sprouting from a dead tree didn't seem unreasonable at all.

The thing was saturated with mana from all the runes, and used to have a bit of moss growing from it, after all. Surely moss was a grass? Right? Mercury decided it was close enough.

Rather politely, he asked <Grass> if it could take root on the log. The ability seemed almost confused at the request. There were no seeds there, and no greenery. But, well, there were wood cells to start from.

Mercury knew some things about DNA. Maybe those were a reasonable starting point? Surely, it'd work.

And, entirely unreasonably, it did.

Somehow, from knotholes where branches had once been, new ones slowly began sprouting. Tiny green stalks, long and thin, which siphoned Mercury's mana and stamina to grow. After a few dozen seconds went by, he stopped using the skill, and cut one off.

It was a long, frail thing, with leaves sprouting off in pairs, and multiple sets of them at the top. Kinda like basil. Gently, while holding it in place using his telekinesis, he cut off one leaf after another, mainly by using <Sever>. It was a delicate process, but the stems didn't feel right for tea, so he pulped those and fed them back to his log.

How his log consumed the biomass was beyond him, but that was fine, too.

Gently, the leaves drifted over to the table, directed by Mercury's mind, and were laid to float atop the water in the teapot. He still had one more thing to try.

Rather rapidly, Mercury broke through the second veil of iridescence, then ignored the cracks in the world and the yawning void. He trusted that <Veil> and <Ancient Shadowweaving> would keep him hidden as long as he didn't pry.

Instead, he focused on weaving. He'd done it for paper before, hadn't he? By now, his Skill had only grown. Plus, he had a rather good understanding of the grass on his plans, since he spent so many nights there.

Additionally, the distance between worlds seemed so small after breaking the second veil. It should come easier now. Some of his ystirs even seemed to slumber in that mindscape.

Gently, he coaxed one of them to consciousness - but not awake, not back to his body. He felt it, out there, somewhere. His <Astral Body>, existing in that ethereal place that wasn't a place at all. He could feel the dual sensation of his paws, flesh and blood, upon a wooden chair, while his mental self rested upon lush grass.

Slowly, in his mind, those two images intersected. His paws, surely, could be on both grass and the chair at the same time.

He wanted it to be true. He understood <Grass>. And this was about as grassy as grass could get, really! He knew it, in and out. He saw it, underneath his feet. Felt it, smelled it.

With his mind, he reached out to the <Dreamweave>. The grass wouldn't make its own way over. But if he knew what it was like, and he could feel it right there, then it shouldn't really be that hard to-

Mercury, with a push and a pull that seemed to overlay two worlds onto each other, dragged a piece of his dreamscape into being. Perhaps dragged was the wrong word. He wove it into being, though that weaving was kind of a transplantation of reality.

Then, there was a bundle of grass at his feet, and the old woman's eyes widened slightly. Of course, there was no dirt for it to root into, so it kind of just... toppled over. Mercury quickly caught it with some ghost hands, then levitated it above the pot. A few uses of <Sever> turned the grass into fine pieces.

He put the lid back onto the pot, then began heating the water with his mana, after deactivating his ihn'ar. It was a bit harder than he remembered, but his ystirs had grown. Even with just one of them awake, his control over mana had improved with practice, and was backed by his far higher stats.

After a minute or so, the water was boiling. Mercury laid down in his chair, and kept the water at a high temperature for a few more minutes, until he felt it was good enough. "The tea is done," he declared.

With a respectful nod, Daryel poured him a cup of it, then herself. There was thin steam wavering above a cup of somewhat opaque, green liquid. A strainer must've been built into the pot somewhere, since no bits of greenery escaped alongside the tea.

There was still a silvery sheen to the drink. It showed in the way that it caught the light, like it was a bit more reflective than it had any right to be,

Daryel lifted the cup to her lips with a slow, steady motion, then drank a bit. She smiled, then placed the cup back down with a soft sound. "Good tea," she praised.

Mercury took that as his cue to taste it himself. The tea was pretty good. It was herbal, he would even call it a little wild, but had a faintly sweet, gentle taste. It did suit him.

"I have learnt much about you, I think," the old woman said, giving a light bow, her robes rustling with the motion. "It will be a pleasure to work with you."

Mercury returned her bow with a nod. "I hope so too. I feel a great deal of anger at one of the thrones."

"Anger?" the woman asked carefully.

"Indeed," Mercury nodded. He held her gaze for a few long moments, not providing additional context. Eventually, the woman sighed.

"I see. I, too, am angry. The faeries seem to lack decorum. They do not give face, anymore, thinking me a plaything like those others. I had to show their misconceptions," she explained.

"Understandable," Mercury admitted.

"Then, perhaps it is time for you to share what you know of the thrones?"

"Not yet," the mopaaw shook his head. "I hardly know why you are hunting them."

"Nor do I know your reasons," the old woman countered.

"Yes, that's correct," Mercury confirmed. "Someone dear to me was hurt. Will that suffice?"

The old woman leaned back. "I suppose it must," she hummed. "Fine, then. My wife, My wife, Lotus of the Watery Grave, once misstepped during practice and ended up halfway into the fae realm. She is a spirit, you see, and barriers are notoriously thin for them. Rather than letting her return, as is customary, the broken throne took her. I am unhappy with this circumstance."

"Reasonable," Mercury agreed.

"So, I wish to find the thrones and have her back, that is all. If I have to break something to make them heed my request, however, I will."

Mercury nodded. The older woman seemed reasonable. Despite her anger, she hadn't broken anything- she hadn't broken *too* many things. So, he was fine giving her a hint.

"I don't know much about the thrones," he admitted readily, "but I do have a piece of one of them with me." Quickly, he took out the antlers from his inventory, placing them on the desk. They glowed a faint blue.

The woman smiled, and it seemed to be somewhat greedily as she eyed the spectral things. Honestly, Mercury was more worried that they'd phase through the table. They seemed... unstable. Volatile, really.

Still, he gave her time to examine them. "I might need a small sample," Daryel eventually admitted.

"You have tracking skills?"

"Some," she confirmed, hovering her hand across the antlers and taking a deep breath. "I believe I may be able to follow the residue given off by these back to its source."

"Take your sample," Mercury confirmed. As long as he could get old Uunrahzil back, the rarity of the material no longer mattered.

With a swipe of her hand, Daryel severed the tip of one of the prongs, catching it in her open palm. Then, Mercury deposited the spectral fragment back into his inventory.

The two of them stood up in an amicable mood, gave one another something between a nod and a bow, then headed back out to the hallway. There, Daryel quickly headed off, walking with purpose, while Mercury rejoined his friends.

"I assume she won't be attending the ball?" Arber asked.

"Doubtful," Mercury agreed. "I think she'll set off in search right now."

"What took you so long?" Alice asked.

"... I made tea."

"Entirely reasonably!" Asher said with gusto. Mercury doubted he had a good grasp of what tea was, but decided to not bring it up to the young fae. Instead, he simply focused.

"Let's go. That ball won't attend itself," he said.

- - -

The evening had been worse than he'd thought. Mercury went through all three of his ystirs, running each of them down to exhaustion. It had been miserable. Why did the fae have to "show off" their champions this way?

They'd been dressed in elaborate outfits, carrying weapons unsuited for them. One of them had fainted from the heat. Multiple had partaken in food that was entirely unsafe of them. Really, Mercury had spent most of his time babysitting *children*.

Because those also participated in the challenge.

A few were barely old enough to go to school, and he had to keep them from eating the shiny food from the funny people. Because their sponsor assured them it was fine! Mercury politely explained that their sponsor also sent them to a death game, which usually ended in sobbing.

But he could deal with sobbing. Those were just kids being kids. No, the glances of the fae were the worst. Like he'd shown them a weakness, that his caring was something they would exploit the moment they could.

He spotted the hungry glints in their eyes. Saw as lady Whisperblossom gave him a slight sneer, as if she found something new to poke. The entire evening, he was simply waiting for it. But it never came.

All it did was leave his nerves frayed. The champions would not be hurt - not that explicitly without breaking a few rules, at least. If they broke something, or hurt someone, well. Mercury would no longer bet on their safety then.

Perhaps they could pick to become servants of the house then. What a disgusting thought.

Taking a deep breath, he laid down on the mattress. He hadn't paid attention to tomorrow's program. He would find out in due time.

Despite being wrapped in his blanket, no dreams came to him.

- - -

Mercury's fifth day in the fae realm was, apparently, to be a day in the gardens.

It was a strange place, really. It felt... liminal, almost.

There were dozens of servants and wooden avatars of Arber swarming about, like bees in a hive, yet they always remained at the very edge of his perception. Mercury did his best to ignore them.

Seeing the comparison, the lush flora inside, with colours of all kinds, and then some he had never seen before, contrasting against the greys of the outside forest was a stark difference. This was only partially a garden. It was more like one of those seed vaults, storing things that could restore life one day.

The air was sickeningly full of pollen, as well as dozens of substances that would have altered his mind. Mercury decided to conjure up his own to breathe.

At least the garden was varied. There weren't simply well trimmed flowers - this was life, made to live as it would. It had a wild, overgrown charm that cultured gardens rarely did. Most of the caretaking involved watering, or, well, feeding. Partially also stopping the plants from overtaking one another.

He suspected that the fake-suns on the ceiling, shedding bright daylight all over the space, were a construction maintained by Arber's enormous vitality. There were also areas with more shade, though, and ones without any sun at all, where fungus grew. Then there were icy places, covered in snow that reminded him somewhat of the Caretaker.

That thought, however, made the ground feel a little shaky for a moment. Mercury took a step, unbalanced, on the gravel path, and stumbled before catching himself. That was... strange.

No one else had made that mistake. Arber, Alice, and Asher followed him without any trouble. But when he thought of the caretaker, he would feel a lurching, like he was being squeezed, and like distances shifted from their proper condition.

Maybe... in a place like this, where the barriers between worlds were thin, he could make that step? Did he want to see the caretaker again? She had been helpful to talk to, yes, but perhaps... no, certainly not yet. Revealing he could do this to the fae would be a bad decision.

Some other time, then.

He simply enjoyed the cold of the icy area, watching icicles that had grown from the thin framings of some of the plant beds. It was a rather pleasant experience, one where <Adaptable> kept him at a comfortable temperature, and he didn't interact much with other fae, since the garden was too large.

His least favourite part was seeing those plants that were not entirely focused on drawing nutrients from soil, water, and air, but instead preferred to supplement them via other means of consumption. The fact that the flesh-or-otherwise-eating-plants section was really rather large.

The tour continued, of course, but he really didn't enjoy that part.

Eventually, it was done, and he returned to the same old ballrooms with the same old faces. He saw why lady Whisperblossom would get tired of it after decades. He already found it boring after only a few days.

- - -

The sixth day was one of games. Bets were placed on racing animals. There were tables for gambling, playing cards, and more, rather strange constructions that he didn't particularly want to get near.

Fae gambled with the most minor of favours here. Only if you took every chit someone had to bet would you ever be able to force them into something major. No, winning a bet here might get you rather little, only a streak would see you winning more.

"So this day is why hosting isn't considered a loss," Mercury remarked, seeing a lucky wheel game that was really rather similar to roulette. As with most ways of gambling, there were rules that made it so that on average, the players would lose.

Since Mercury was not a fae, however, he didn't have any favours to bet. He could borrow them, of course, and see if he could win more. He was still expected to participate, after all.

Strangely, the person giving him favours to bargain with, even if it was simply a handful of minor ones, was lady Whisperblossom. Perhaps she considered it payback for when he had coaxed an extra reward out of her? It was a good way to resolve that in his eyes. Now, even if he lost everything, it wouldn't be too troublesome for him.

He'd made her swear that these came without any strings attached, after all. Metaphorically, and literally. It was simply making up for something he had done, and they were even.

Mercury was able to make the bargains last for a while, but eventually ran out. He had participated in the games rather enough though, so none faulted him when he retreated a little.

Misha, for their part, was cleaning house. They kept winning until they were removed from the premises. Several other scions, and even some older fae, got all their bargains taken by them.

Really, Mercury was glad he hadn't played against the scion of Chill. Really, he seemed rather fearsome. Winning bargains consistently when the odds were rather stacked against him?

The mopaaw didn't stay long enough to see the results play out, but with the amount of substances being consumed, he wagered that it would involve vomit and lots of cleaning.

No dreams came for him.

Perhaps the next day would be better.

- - -

The seventh day of Mercury's stay in the fae realm was special, because, well, the number seven was special. It was kind of like an anniversary, really. But no one celebrated it.

There was, however, a unique tradition, usually carried out by the rulers of the courts.

Who Mercury would meet for the first time.