

Chapter 216: Perspective

It had been a long while since Mercury last rode a carriage. It had been... with Zyl? All that time ago? What a strange thought.

When reincarnated into a somewhat medieval world, Mercury had expected a lot more... well. Horses, knights, dwarves and elves. Instead what he got were entirely alien creatures beyond mortal comprehension. Well, and humans, ironically. But he knew there were elves and dwarves out there. One day he would get to them.

For now, though, he simply looked outside the carriage window. Orin, the driver, sat both inside and outside, maintaining two separate bodies of orange jello and swirling leaves. They were facing the window. Mercury looked at them curiously. "How long until we reach the tree?" he asked.

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Orin turned the body they kept inside the carriage to face the mopaaw more closely.

It was a normal experience for them to exist in multiple places. Their Skill called <Superposition> made it an easy task, having gone through a few levels. As it should; they had burnt decades worth of Skill points on it.

But what they usually did not experience was the gradient. Their current body, the one inside the carriage, felt so much more dense. Compressed. Real. <True>.

That last one rang out in their mind as the correct one. Orin felt more true when they were inside the carriage. It felt strange, almost antithetical to the idea of existing in multiple places. But the feeling was not entirely unpleasant.

What did feel strange, however, was when they looked at Mercury. The one they were playing envoy for. The creature that had rosen through the fae realm explosively, standing up to the rulers at every corner. Who had brought back one-

"Sorry, Orin?" Mercury asked.

"Ah, yes," the fae replied, calling themselves back to the present moment. "It will take a few days. No more than a page, should our journey go uninterrupted. We will be leaving the ashen forest by tomorrow eve. After that, we shall journey through the canyons in the wastes."

"The wastes?" the creature they faced interrogated.

Orin nodded faintly. "Indeed. The wastes are the area over which none of the courts hold dominion. It is closest to the void, only generally explored by the guardians. Which makes it the most dangerous region of the fae realm, too." They paused for a moment, then reconsidered. "Most directly hostile, at least. The courts themselves are rather perilous, too."

Well, for Orin they were. Not for Mercury, it seemed.

"I see," Mercury replied, still maintaining wariness. The mopaaw spoke no word of thanks, as was wise when dealing with fae.

Not that it was necessary now. Orin was careful to work as little magic on the esteemed guest as possible. To mess with him was to mess with forces Orin would rather not face. So much so that they abandoned all ideas of mischief.

Not that he was not intimidating enough by himself. Once the words were spoken, Orin carefully faced the window again, making sure not to linger on the mopaaw's eyes too much. That would make them feel like they were about to lose themselves in another world.

At least, whenever that veil of clouds briefly lifted. Orin thought it was that shawl of theirs, casting a <Veil> of stormclouds over the creature. It made him seem innocuous, but Orin could see past the facade. They *knew* that Mercury was not normal, not to be underestimated or messed with.

So, they were happy to simply do their duty as chaperone. Be a good envoy, get the guest to the destination, speak when spoken to.

Reduced to such a base duty, the kind human servants usually carried out felt... not as terrible as they had imagined. Their dog-like head tilted a little at that consideration. Why did they not hate it? Should they not? This kind of servitude... Ah, maybe it was because of the fear of consequences.

"Is there something on your mind?" Mercury asked, suddenly.

Orin turned to find those endlessly deep eyes staring at them, boring into them. They flinched, unable to hold back, and suddenly, the pressure vanished. As though their hand touched the void, but then the void withdrew.

Still, those eyes looked at them. Not cruelly, simply with curiosity. "Does my presence cause you discomfort?"

"I would not say so, esteemed guest," Orin claimed. It was the truth. They would never say it out loud.

Yet still, those eyes laid on them, and that twinge of reality, that feeling of difference between them and the body outside suddenly spun slightly. "So it does," the guest noted.

Orin began to feel a twinge of worry, too.

"Why is that?" the creature in front of him interrogated. It felt like the whole world was reduced to the two of them, the heroine that shared their carriage forgotten.

The leaves within Orin spun faster, their facsimile fur standing on end. Should they mount another feeble attempt at deception? Should-

Once again, the pressure stopped. Dissipated like the clouds after a storm, with clear skies remaining. Mercury spoke again. "I see," he said. "You feel I would strike against you in retribution."

True.

"I cannot make you feel at ease, but I can tell you some simple things about me. I do not enjoy hurting creatures. I try to not harm anyone who doesn't hurt me or mine. You may hate me as much as you like without fear of redemption," Mercury said.

The words hung in the silence of the cabin for a moment. Orin's insides writhed in turmoil. Somehow, they felt deception was impossible. They were being read as though an open book.

Yet, they could not bring themselves to look away. There was something enticing about the encounter, at the same time as they felt afraid. It was because... they also knew it was the <Truth>. There was no danger for them.

Which was a terribly strange feeling. There was *a/ways* danger in the fae realm. Yet, now, when faced with a being that had the rulers changing ancient pacts, and forging new ones to appease... they felt at ease? Terrifying.

Mercury averted his eyes first, and Orin could tell what he was thinking too. That it was a pointless exercise to reassure someone so... skittish? Were they skittish?

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The journey through the ashen forest went by without a hitch. Husks of trees were easily bypassed or torn through silently. The critters of the landscape left the carriage well alone, thanks to some minor enchantments applied by king Oberon.

After that, they passed through an invisible, rippling barrier. Orin recognized the change. They were within the dread wastes now. Between courts, in lawless lands. Of course, their strange passenger noticed to, cracking open a closed eye at the changed atmosphere, before closing it again.

Mercury has been meditating for the last few days. Orin sometimes wondered what passed through his head but did not dare ask. Instead, their own mind occupied them plenty.

Now, in the canyons of the wastes, things were more dangerous. These routes avoided the terrors of the sky, but allowed those who lived in the tunnels easier access. They could only hope to not be met with too much trouble.

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The second day in the wastes was when they were first attacked.

Of course it could not have simply gone off without a hitch. Orin knew it when the air shifted subtly, and there was the scent of ancient dust stirring up. Then, their seats shook faintly.

Outside, the terrezays huffed slightly, their raptor-feet feebly scratching at the stones.

The very world grew heavy, and Orin felt pressure settled upon both their present bodies. Their tail twitched. "It would appear that we will be attacked."

"So it seems," the heroine - Alice, as she currently fancied herself - noted.

At that, Mercury cracked open an eye. "Oh?"

"Burrowers," Orin said. "Twisted creatures that eat at the edges of the realm. They chew at reality itself."

"Hmmm," the mopaaw hummed. "Not good to keep for gardening, are they?"

Orin twitched in confusion. "No. They eat earth and produce no byproducts, simply growing larger. And more venomous. Decay and rot in their fangs."

Mercury nodded. "Right. Let us take care of this then."

Then, he rose onto all three of his legs, as a dark prosthesis wove around the stump of the last one. The liquid metal seemed to twitch and groan with hunger, sending another shiver down Orin's spine.

"Actually," Mercury hummed, standing in front of the door. "I think I can take care of this by myself."

Alice giggled at that, holding up a frail hand before her mouth. "Good luck, then."

Before Orin could even protest, the door of the carriage opened by itself. Seeing someone interact with the world in such an undetectable way was still strange. No sign of limbs or magic, not even hastily constructed. A brush of air and the door opened.

With it, the outside air entered, and the smell of rot was briefly overwhelming. Orin grimaced in disgust, both their bodies feeling decay lapping at them. Like they were dying, just faster.

Then, the smell vanished. The oppressive disgust was washed away as if by a spring breeze. No, not *as if*. It simply was. There was a breeze in the air. A drop of rain fell on Orin's cheek, harmlessly sliding down and dropping onto the bench they sat on.

Alice looked at them with a smile. "Rainfall is his middle name, you know?" she remarked, innocently.

Orin's eyes widened. Rainfall. Another droplet fell inside the carriage, and slowly, Orin turned to see the outside. It was storming, wildly. Thousands of droplets fell every moment, everywhere. The wastes never saw rain. Never.

A worm burst from the ground. It was titanic, a wriggling mass of flesh and teeth. It was rust-brown, and pulsed with the essence of decay. Orin could watch as the realm itself dissolved at its maw, as it chewed through the essence of even the air.

As the world itself died a true death before its maw.

Then it died.

Orin had blinked, looked away for a moment, and suddenly the worm laid crushed and broken on the floor, each raindrop carving another blood furrow through its body, before feebly striking against the rocky ground, harmlessly becoming a puddle.

More of the creatures emerged, of course. Burrowers never came on their own. They rose from great hives in the depths of the realm, gnawing away at its heart as yet another infringement upon reality. Yet, each one, in turn, as they dove out of the ground, died.

Terrifyingly, Mercury just stood there.

His eyes darted around as though he was some kind of conductor. Invisible force, his mind and Skills, slammed into the worms. Their teeth were broken. Their arcs through the air cut short and their momentum rendered null.

A moment later, a thundercrack split the sky, and the flash of lightning hit Orin's eyes. Yet it had not come from the sky. There was a javelin, carved from smooth bone, lodged inside one of the worms. A dozen more hovered around the mopaaw.

Then, for some time, thunderclap after thunderclap echoed across the canyon. Burrowers, the enders of reality, the first envoys of the void... were witnessed and crushed. Systematically disassembled by a hundred flying hands, striking with massive force and wielding weapons of storm.

Time trickled by. When five minutes had passed, the rain had washed away the bodies of the burrowers. They had all been broken, and then the water had dismantled the corpses. When all was said and done, even the blood had been washed away, and when the rainfall stopped, there was nothing left.

Mercury turned around, and the storm withdrew in moments. The air was left smelling clean. No dust, no decay, no rot. Just clean air.

With casual movements, the mopaaw hopped back into the carriage, the door of swirling leaves closing behind them. They stumbled a little when the prosthesis hit the floor. "Ah, dang. Hard to get used to it when my leg is still regrowing," he said, almost apologetically, as if stumbling was somehow a faux pas.

Orin nodded numbly. The fact that during that entire encounter, not a single bit of harm had befallen them was still strange. They ran a hand through the dishevelled fur of their head, noting that it felt faintly wet, but was already drying.

Strangely, the fact that they felt no fear, in and of itself, was a little terrifying.

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More days passed on the journey. The envoy grew to know the mopaaw more and more. Those unfathomable eyes that seemed to only truly open when regarding someone's deepest secrets. Orin now knew that the clouds covering them were there for their benefit.

Like someone putting a net under a bridge to make the prospect of falling less intimidating.

Orin was grateful for them. They felt that being witnessed by Mercury - truly witnessed - would be a distinctly uncomfortable experience.

The way he just... stood there. Unmoving, glancing around as if lazily, as bodies were broken and crumpled around him... It was difficult to describe the strangeness of that sight. The dissonance of what they saw and what they felt. Because, within all the destruction, the <Truth> was that they were safe.

Day by day, the carriage advanced further, and even the terrezays were entirely undisturbed by the fights, now. The sights were still strange, and somewhat terrifying, yet, there was this absolute knowledge of safety. Like killing intent, yet inverted. A clear knowledge that they would be protected.

So, after three more encounters, they left the desolate canyons at the edge of reality behind, and finally entered the territory of the court of Mellow. The air shifted once more. The dusty smell disappeared, and things suddenly felt different. Less desolate, but more solemn.

A mantle of graveyard quiet covered the realm. A thin layer of snow remained on the ground. It wasn't really cold, only slightly chilly, but the air was weighty and dignified. Like a scornful grandmother at a funeral, Orin thought.

Gently, a breeze drifted over the carriage. Their other body, the one that sat outside was bothered faintly by this. Tiny drafts of snow stirred in the quiet lands, as the terrezays trudged ever onward.

"I did not expect the court of Mellow to be so quiet," Mercury noted.

"Not all courts wear their attributes on their realm. You have remained at the court of Chill's, yet the ashen forest is hardly freezing. These are, after all, simply territories. When we can summon our attributes at any moment, the courts are made of the people within them, rather than their surroundings, would you not say?" Orin explained.

The mopaaw tilted his head for a few moments, then nodded. "I see. Your explanation is accepted." Gratitude expressed without thanks.

Orin smiled faintly, taking some amount of solace in the familiar games and atmosphere. Even if it was too chilly for them. That much was fine, they could easily endure it.

Around them, the landscape slowly changed as they walked deeper into the realm of Mellow. The lightly snowed over tundra shifted as they walked upwards, the ground underneath the snow turning into frozen sand, with streams of softly running water streaming from dozens of shallow ponds.

Those ponds, themselves, were usually overgrown with yellowing moss, and rose coloured lily pads. It was a slow change, and they were still ascending upwards, though the terrezays struggled slightly more with the sandy ground.

Still, the carriage trudged on, and once another full day had passed, Mercury opened his eyes again. He looked out of the window the moment they crested a hill and the ruined tree of mellow came into view.

Orin looked at the familiar sight, too. The trunk, broken and split down the middle. Its hollow insides bared for the whole world to see. Its bark was broken. Charred and frozen and diseased. Decay had eaten away at it, long after the split occurred.

The tree was desiccated. Thoroughly atrophied after having laid dead so long. Its branches had withered and broken, a news of decaying leaves and sticks surrounding it like a great bird's nest.

No, actually... there were birds. Foraging creatures, pecking away at the shards of wood. That was troublesome. Mercury had been given a promise of protection. Orin wondered, briefly, what would be done about that. There had to be measures in place.

Scavengers infested the corpse of the tree. Like a giant beset by ants, it was being further disassembled, stolen away, bit by bit. It was a sad sight.

Mercury let out a soft hum next to Orin. "I suppose this is what you would like me to fix?" he asked.

Orin nodded softly. "Yes."

"Your court still knows the prize that must be paid?"

"Yes," the envoy nodded.

"Acceptable, then," Mercury replied calmly. Those unfathomable eyes staring ahead, as if already unveiling each secret the tree hid. Orin shook their head slightly, letting those thoughts fall aside easily.

It didn't matter. Their duty was to be an envoy. Escort the visitor to the tree, make sure no harm came to him via deception. The promise of protection would be enforced by someone else in Mellow. And then there was the heroine... No covenant protected her, yet Orin got the feeling that having her come to harm was a poor idea.

They took a moment to compose themselves, before spurring the terrezays on again. The air felt tense. They truly hoped nothing went wrong with this little misadventure they were sent on. Mercury seemed rather kind, and so did the heroine. Hopefully neither would be forced to act against that nature.

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Mercury looked out the window at the husk of the giant tree. He breathed in deep through his nose, then out through his mouth.

He looked at the sunken branches, the parasitic birds that infested them, the way the snow laid heavily on all the remaining leaves, rotting while attached to the branches. He saw all the decay, the obvious destruction.

It was dead.

Mercury didn't need to look closer to see that. This tree's physical existence had died, fully and properly. The fact that Mellow had let it get to this point was a staggering display of incompetence. In fact, with the tree so huge, it had to have been ancient.

Which meant, it probably had tons of Skills and life, especially being a plant. If it died - and it *had* died - there must have either been a huge cataclysm or... the tree had *wanted* to die. Mercury felt a little bit of anger at the thought.

There was a huge wound along the center of the tree, lightning and electricity having scorched the wood. But that was just that, a wound. Would a tree this huge have fallen from that? Would Arber have fallen from that?

No, Mercury didn't think so. He had promised Mellow to try to fix this problem, not to actually fix this. Then again, failing his first task would suck. Hmm, what had the exact wording been again? Mercury dug through his <Oceanic Consciousness> until he found it. He said that he would "seek to communicate with their tree spirit during his second visit."

This was, technically, his third visit now, but that had been revised due to... extenuating circumstances. This was his second *invited* visit. So it was fine, in the end. He would communicate with the spirit of the tree, if there still was one.

Arber had called it an old friend, had they not? Mercury thought it would be a real shame if they were to die. At the very least, he should try his best, shouldn't he?

Sighing softly, Mercury let the carriage begin to rumble down the hill, towards the tree, waiting the last few hours. Eventually, they stopped, the enormous plant standing tall as a skyscraper, its corpse providing a canopy of shade.

Mercury smelled the decay and drew his <Rainfall> a little tighter. Then, steeling his expression, he pushed open the door to the outside world. It was time to talk to this dead tree.