

Chapter 192: Shadowshaping

Luckily, Mercury's mind was built to withstand blows far harder than those. Having a whole new way to perceive the world, alongside the memories on how to interpret those signals certainly was unusual, but it *had* happened to him before.

After being briefly stunned, Mercury shifted his ystirs. His imagination crumbled, leaving the contest area empty for use by others. With a lot of self control, he managed to walk stably out of the small arena.

All the while, he was moving his patterns of thought. One ystir went back to sleep, one processed the world normally, and a final part of his mind entirely untangled the new sensations. He split off those bits too, so that the ystir controlling his body didn't have to deal with them yet.

It worked flawlessly. Soon, he stood by Arber's side again, wearing a smug smile. The tree gazed back at the mopaaw. "That went remarkably well," they commented.

Mercury gave a small shrug. "Well. Young nobles."

"You goaded them rather well."

"I've talked to kids before," he said noncommittally. Side jobs doing some babysitting in college were turning out helpful now.

Still, most of the attention was a new sense of reality as a whole. He wouldn't be granted this perspective permanently, of course. The heir of Shadow hadn't explicitly mentioned a timeframe, but Mercury wagered it was somewhere along the one month line.

... Yet another thing where he wanted to shock fae society. How long until he could approximate shadow perception himself? A page? A day? Maybe a few hours from now?

Mercury grinned at the prospect, redoubling his efforts to understand. Somehow, as if by nature, he could feel shadows around himself. It was in a strange, murky kind of way. Shadows weren't exactly defined, after all, they were a lack of light compared to the surroundings.

So really, there was no way this properly functioned in terms of science. Then again, physics generally seemed more... loose, in the fae realm. Which made sense, given that it seemed to be constantly falling apart at the seams.

Swiftly, Mercury discarded his preconceived notions of what was possible or reasonable, breaking the veil of gold in the process. The world became more vibrant, each shadow more saturated. More real. He understood them as such now, his mindframe malleable.

Almost as malleable as shadows were. Evershifting, always suiting themselves to every person, every object, every shift in light. That was the first bit of truth he grasped, within minutes of acquiring this new sight.

The second insight took longer. It took for him to adjust to the new perspective, to accept the blurry edges, stop trying to shape it into his preconceived notions. He, too, needed to be adaptable to see through the shadows. Imitate what they did, as they imitated life.

Rapidly, he absorbed the information. The blurry edges mattered less once he looked at the whole picture rather than each individual shadow. It was, in essence, a two dimensional projection of a three dimensional world. So it didn't give him *all* information - but it didn't have to.

Instead, there was something far more valuable there. Something familiar, a deep, yawning void hidden in old, ancient shadows.

One such was cast by Arber. The shadow conjured by the enormous tree was wide and unfathomable, like a giant chasm carving deep into the earth. In it, something old lingered, hungered.

Mercury understood, then, that he was right. This wasn't a simple perception of shadow he had acquired, it was more than that. He had gained the ability to view the hidden worlds in them, too, which he guessed was unique to the snake. Because it wasn't simply an heir to Shadow, it was trained to become a keeper of the void.

With little hesitation, Mercury leaned into his understanding of <Nothingness>, wrapping it around himself. It almost felt like the dracoleather cloak had simply grown heavier, infused with the concept of that infinite emptiness. With that measure in place, the creature simply glanced over him.

It took another ystir to keep it in place, and multiple zeyjn to monitor the shadow painting of the world in general, but he held it all in place nonetheless, rousing the sleeping part of himself one more.

Minutes ticked by, then an hour. His body watched the challenges, and none dared approach him anymore. He had proven himself among the heirs. The fiery one, Asher, shifted from one foot to another, seemingly unsure whether to approach. Mercury left him to his indecision.

There were better things to focus on. Slowly, the coating of <Nothingness> thickened, as he wove strands around himself. Arber gave him a slightly suspicious look once, but Mercury flashed an optimistic smile. Then, the tree kind of shrugged and left the mopaaw be.

A second hour passed. Then, Mercury moved his perception into the shadows.

Distantly, he felt the veil of iridescence shattering. Each shadow became more than that - became an open door, an entrance to the outside world. To the deep, vast void. Mentally, he let his perception wander a bit deeper in, close to the leviathan that dwelled within there.

It drifted through there, and he knew it felt his gaze for a moment. But when it moved to stare back, it was a blank bit of void. The fact that Mercury, in terms of his power, was so much lower than it, probably helped. Rather than gaze at him, the thing turned and looked away.

Mercury allowed himself a small smile. He had not expected it to meld *this* well with <Nothingness>, yet here he was, diving close to titans that could crush him. Yet the abyss *didn't* gaze back. Fuck you, Nietzsche.

Then, he took a deep breath, refusing to let himself be dominated by those emotions. Instead, he tried looking at it more reasonably, if outside the bounds of real logic, given that his *ihn'ar* actively allowed him to view past those.

Still, he used it, in a strange state of contradiction. Then he focused on actually planning, rather than analyzing his own thought processes.

Slowly, things clicked into place. Shadows were malleable, deep, gateways to the void. They could age and had... almost personalities of their own - of course they did, they mimicked their owners after all.

Within those fake realms, projected onto the ground, there was more <Nothingness>. Did it come from the lack of perception in shadows? Or the associations people had with them? Was light itself somehow antithetical to true void? Of course, it must be, since light was photons. Energy.

Right, then. He also existed, though, and was thereby antithetical to the void. Unless he could stop existing while still maintaining his sense of self? Mercury shelved the idea for the future - for now it sounded rather suicidal.

Instead, he thought more, his *ystirs* churning at full capacity. Thoughts raced through his mind as he understood the strange perspective more and more. The heir of Shadow was able to use their own abilities as gates to the void. Other abilities would serve just as well. Mercury had his *ihn'ar*, for example.

<Dreamweave>, <Nothingness>, and even just breaking the veil of iridescence; each of those allowed Mercury to peer into other worlds. Into the void. So, there was no "one way" to go there. The void was all around, infinite, and hungry, after all. It would take every scrap, every corner, every nook and cranny of this world it could.

The thing to be afraid, therefore, was not shadows. Not dark colours, for those absorbed light. Became warmer.

No, the thing to fear was *absence*. That was the true danger, because wherever the world was thin, the void would creep in through the edges. Corrupt and eat away wherever it could, yet at the same time, serving as an anchor and a tapestry the world was woven into.

Mercury found it fascinating. His dreams were such an incredible, yet inaccurate mirror, maybe even shadow, of this world. One day, maybe, he would become able to mimic it in all its infinite complexity. Then, would it still be a dream?

Would he simply have woven his own world?

He snuffed the thought out like a candle flame. There was no merit to it yet, and it was bright enough to attract the leviathan.

Rather than that, Mercury slowly, carefully, retracted his gaze from that aspect of shadow. The perspective he had gained was valuable in many other ways, too, after all. It told him about the shape of this world.

In his ihn'ar, Mercury dove behind the veil of iridescence again, focusing on the waking world, rather than delving too deep into what lay outside of it. His mastery of <Nothingness> had just improved, he did not yet need to understand it further, not just yet.

Expand, then consolidate. Right now, Mercury needed to consolidate his understanding of <Nothingness>.

Another deep breath later, his mind spun further thought, understandings of shadow. It didn't feel the same as <Wind> or <Water>, which he had been able to compartmentalize and slot away. Shadow... wasn't that. It didn't wish to listen to him, to become a friend.

He could relate to it - that connection was there - but he would never be able to consider it a friend. That much, it made clear. Would he be able to become closer to it? Certainly. Really, he could almost feel his affinity for the element rising, as <Adaptable>, <Unrestrained>, and <Itinerant> worked in tandem to carve out a path.

A simple ihn'ar of <Shadow> wouldn't do. This wasn't a substance in and of itself, it was born of circumstance. Yet it was so real, so understood, so common. It wasn't a friend nor a foe, it simply mimicked, and would not listen.

To twist <Shadow>, Mercury would have to twist the real world. This? This he was capable of.

His third ystir, too, turned to the element now, and suddenly, his three mind worked as one. He remembered. How he had broken down the core of the wyvern, learnt ice magic, how he had befriended the <Wind>, and the <Water>, and the <Grass>.

It clicked into place. Altering the real world to coax the shadows, then altering the shadows and coaxing the real world to adapt. It was a wonderful blend of magic and understanding. It was his own creation.

[The individual has acquired the ability <Ancient Shadowweaving (lowest)> through a specific action!]

Then, he let the constructs fall, and dropped out of ihn'ar. He was breathing heavily, his eyes wild and intense. The snake, whose perspective he had taken only... half a day ago, now, apparently, stared at him.

And indeed, half a day had passed. While creating this technique, hours had flown by in the blink of an eye. The foundation Mercury had built allowed him to adapt, and create his own technique.

He grinned, looked at the snake. For a moment, he reached out to the shadows, beckoned them to move, willed the possibility into reality using his mana. They responded. A small, crude hand rose from the snake's shadow, waving it over.

Instantly, the reptile's eyes widened. Across the crowd, it locked gazes with Mercury, who flashed it a grin. A moment later, the young keeper slid into the ground as a shadow itself, appearing in front of Mercury a moment later.

It opened its mouth, eager to speak and ask and hungry for Mercury's secrets, but the mopaaw simply smiled, then spoke first.

"You may have your perspective back, now," he said, calmly.

The snake's already crumbling facade of calm fell apart entirely. Its mouth dropped open, its pupils thin. Furious and interested and horrified all at the same time. "I- what? Just... how...?"

Mercury tilted his head. "I don't believe I offered you my perspective on my Skills, did I?"

In truth, all of them had been required for this. His Skills. His titles, his abilities. Every single enhancement to his talent and bit of learning he'd done slotted into this. It even advanced his ice magic by another level, and he would wager he was also a step closer to turning it into iceweaving.

The fae heir simply stared, seemingly unable to compute the refusal of their request.

"No," they stammered. "You have not, but surely, we can trade? Is your affinity truly so-"

"Shhhh. My head aches, now, from how rudely someone deposited new knowledge into it," Mercury teased. "Please, take your perspective back."

"... Yes. Certainly."

Something ethereal left Mercury. It shifted his sight again, the shadows becoming less... vibrant. They weren't part of his basic experience more, being slightly more distant. Like he had to reach out and grab them.

Not very far, of course, since he had just created an ability for them, but still.

"Please, esteemed guest, would you teach this-"

"No," Mercury shook his head. "No, no. That's not how that works at all, is it? You don't get to pour out your grievances, then try to challenge me to a duel that is unfavourable to me, then look down on me the entire time, then ask me to suddenly tell you all my secrets. That won't do at all."

There was no reply to that.

"That's what I thought. So. Here's what's gonna happen. There won't be any harsh feelings about you challenging me. I can put that aside. What I cannot put aside is the clear disrespect and vitriol you have shown me."

"... Reasonable," the snake hissed.

"And so, if you wish to have anything from me, you will trade. In a little while. Ask me again tomorrow. Your name was Kilorak, is that right?" Mercury asked.

"There are more titles," the shadow said weakly.

"You would have me utter that one out loud, for all to hear?" he countered.

The snake retreated back a step. "I suppose... not."

"I see. Go, then, heir of Shadow. We shall talk another day."

With a meek nod, the snake disappeared off into the distance. Mercury saw Misha, the heir of Chill wear a sinister smile. They seemed to revel in seeing the others humbled. The beast of Blossom simply grinned, staring at the snake with much more obvious pleasure.

Mercury simply took his time, watching the day drift by. His challenges were done.

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Another two hours passed, in which Misha of Chill went into the arena twice. Both times, he emerged victorious, having absolutely crushed their enemies. Mercury didn't know what the best had been, but they appeared more insidious than simple servitude.

Briefly, he wondered why the fae were so obsessed with servants as to have multiple people request such of him, but then again, it might be because he was a curiosity and not actually apply to other fae at all.

He had, however, seen it also happen with fae themselves a few times, so it certainly wasn't entirely to be ruled out. But it did seem to happen quite a bit less.

Not too long after Misha had finished their contests, the day drew to a close. There would be a dinner reception - one he wouldn't eat anything at - and then, there would be another breakfast the next day. That would be his next meal.

For now, Mercury drew on <Nutritional Preservation> in order to feel full. It curbed his hunger, letting him fully focus on the social aspect.

Arber smiled as they accompanied him inside, Alice hanging back a smidge. She had been through the wringer - out of any singular person in attendance, she had been challenged the most. Almost every moment she spent out there was in one of the fields.

Sometimes she would exist, take a step towards the audience, land in another dueling spot, and have yet another challenge begin. It was a grueling gauntlet, and the hero seemed worn out by it.

Despite that, she still stood behind Mercury. He appreciated that, though the self sacrifice felt a little unnecessary. If she needed sleep, she should sleep. Heck, two thirds of him were sleeping then and there!

Still, Mercury also did as he was meant to. He showed the lady Witness all the respect she was due in her house, and followed Arber.

On the way there, once they were back inside, but not yet in the great hall, there was a small lurch. The tunnels changed, and suddenly, the three of them were on their own, no longer surrounded by the mass of bizarre bodies and existences.

“So, I would say your first day went about as well as it could have, Mercury,” Arber said, mirth in their voice. “You really showed those land-lovers.”

Alice slightly tilted her head. “Yes, that’s true! Since you are still here with us, you must have won both times. Handling the shadows well?”

With even more amusement, Arber spoke. “He already returned the perspective.”

“... Eh?” Alice mumbled incredulously, turning to face the mopaaw.

“Yeah,” Mercury nodded along. “I learnt a new ability. It fills a similar function, but works a bit better for my abilities.” With a twist of effort, he convinced the world that clearly, his shadow should be cast in a way that wrapped all the way around his right front leg, turning the white fur a dark gray. “See?”

The hero blinked once, then again. Slowly, an uneasy smile settled on her lips. “I, uh, I see! Rather impressive, Mercury!”

“It’s not ihn’ar.”

The smile disappeared. “It... isn’t?”

He shook his head lightly as they walked through corridors of dark wood. “No. It’s a mix of magic and understanding. It’s fooling the world into changing the shadows, then fooling those shadows into changing the world.”

“Riiight,” Alice replied, dragging the words out. She looked at Arber as though searching for help.

The mannequin avatar simply shrugged, the giant pirate hat on their head bobbing along. “No clue what he’s on about. Can’t say I’ve ever heard those words in that order in all my times upon the seas.”

Once more, Alice was forced to blink in confusion. Then, finally, she just leaned her head back and laughed. “You’re ridiculous,” she said, in between giggles. “Both of you! Haaah. Fuck. I need a shower.”

Mercury nodded solemnly. It was true, after all. The hero had gotten covered in dirt, and burns, and ice, as well as a bunch of other elements.

"You did bring spare clothing, right?" Mercury asked.

She flashed him a short smile. "These'll repair themselves with little trouble. They're gifts. I couldn't bear to see them break."

"Right, right," Mercury nodded along. A bit later, Alice was in her room, doing whatever it is she needed to do. Mercury entered his own moments later. They had a little bit of time before the next gathering, so he took deep breaths.

He'd been neglecting his practice, hadn't he? Now that he had an overlap between regular magic, and his ihn'ar, he set about it again. Time to practice conjuring some ice.

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The acts of conjuring and manipulating the element did come quite a bit more easily to him now. He had gotten used to it more, the act of imposing his will on the world, and requesting it buckle. It was a tenuous balance to strike, and he did not always find it perfectly, but he was better now.

His epiphanies in shadow helped him along in his icy practice as well - what fit together better than cold and dark, after all? Of course, shadows weren't true darkness, but- he was getting off track.

What mattered was the fact that he began using his magic a little more freeform. He transformed the mana, of course, but he supplemented parts of the magic circle with associations and desires. It seemed to suit his style better, and meshed well with traditional magic.

Too soon was this practice cut short, when a knock resounded against his door.

"Dinner is ready to attend," Arber's voice rang out from the hallway... and the walls.

With a small sigh, Mercury hopped off the bed. He gave a small wince at the aches in his muscles and his mind, quickly swapping out his currently active ystir. Feeling a well rested mind take over, Mercury smiled. That was better.

Then, he made his way to the great hall.