

Chapter 188: Unwelcome Guest

Mercury dreamt. He'd known it would happen the moment he fell asleep. The connection to the realm within his mind was there, and he reached out for it purposefully, wanting to go there. It felt closer, yet more distant, a strange kind of dissonance in his heart.

But he arrived. In that same place, the fields of verdant grass, waving in the wind. There was a citadel of fire to the north, a castle of glass to the west, a fountain of water to the south, and dark mountains to the east. A silver sun and a pale moon, as well as two stars, one a network of tiny strings, the other a piece of quiet radiance, hung in a patchwork sky.

On the verdant fields, there was old Uunrahzil. Mercury saw the air twist around the ancient one in a vast sea of the auras he'd recently gained the ability to perceive. A brilliant radiance like a hundred thousand fireflies.

There was, additionally, another guest.

'Yr'enzel, mine tri'ht. Who is this guest?' old Uunrahzil rumbled. Their thoughts vibrated Mercury's entire dreamscape. There was no kindness in their thoughts, simply the kind of wariness that came from being betrayed one too many times.

And it was a fair assessment. Mercury did not remember inviting anyone. The visitor also stood still, staring up into the sun and moon.

They were tall. Much more humanoid than old dreamweaver, but with the same strange shapes and proportions that so many of the fae shared. Gaunt and long limbed, but entirely constructed from veins of mana.

However, that was where the similarities ended. They were yet again taller than most of the fae, unreasonably tall, really. Eight spindly limbs protruded from the slides of their elongated torso, two of them ending in sickles, two in hands, two in tentacles, and two in maws, as best as Mercury could tell.

Given that they were currently made from mana entirely, telling shapes was kind of hard.

The face, especially, had a different structure from anything Mercury had seen before. Usually, mana veins followed similar structure to blood veins, to reach all parts of the body. Mercury was breaking this rule by now, since his body wasn't exactly all of him anymore. Dreamweaver, too, broke this rule, by virtue of having an entirely alien body.

But the fae... they tried to fake being human, to a degree. Yet this one had simply stopped all those attempts when it came to its head. It was simply... void? No, that wasn't right, Mercury had just *seen* the void, and that was different. This one seemed... foreboding, then.

It was like the veins itself spoke a promise of rot and decay, or the end times coming.

But the creature remained motionless, its eyeless gaze fixed upon the sun in the sky. Slowly, ever so slowly, one of its appendages moved. The one with the hand at the end of it. Ever so slowly, it reached upwards.

‘Bright.’ Its voice was an echo, a reverberation of a hundred people hoarse from screaming. A chorus of loss and dread. ‘Star,’ they hummed, much more quietly. Thoughtfully.

Mercury felt strange for a moment. A mixture of worry and fear, yet at the same time calm understanding washed over him. The creature was desperate, fading. At the edge of existence, yet still clinging onto it, ready to bring destruction.

They were like a ruler on an empty throne. The castle decayed, the court dead, clinging to a role that is no longer required, yet still holding that same authority. Like someone who could make orders but had not done so because they were too broken.

‘My star,’ Mercury replied. He’d thought it at the creature without thinking.

Slowly, ever so slowly, the thing froze. Then, silence hung heavily for a few moments. Eventually, its head turned. That same dreadful, rotten, eyeless gaze now landed on Mercury.

Staring at the thing, he finally noticed that it had no aura. Not a hint of one. No ghostly light around it, no hint at its nature. As though it wasn’t there at all.

The thing cocked its head. ‘Yours?’

‘Me,” Mercury replied. It was truthful, after all. He knew it, deep down. That heart was, to a substantial degree, him. The Dream of Starvation was bound to him, after all, yet cycles down below, hovering around the sun.

‘I see,’ the monster replied, returning its gaze to the shining orb. ‘Price?’

Its gaze was enthralled. Mercury heard in its voice that the question had no hostility. It was a simple thing. They were used to owning, to simply paying no matter what the price was. The kind of casual disregard for money that usually was exclusive to rich people.

Well, was it money for the fae? ... Did it matter?

The thought certainly didn’t make Mercury look upon it favourably.

‘It’s not for sale,’ he intoned, firmly.

Silence hung in the air for a moment. The creature turned its eyeless gaze of decay to him, properly looking for once. Its head tilted to the side. ‘... Decline?’

‘Indeed.’

Slowly, its head turned again, towards Mercury’s sun. His star. It extended a second hand alongside the first one. Then both its maw appendages, and the tentacles too. It gazed, eyelessly, hungrily.

A mouth tore open on the monster's face.

"Want."

The desire spilled forth violently.

Those were the first words audibly uttered in Mercury's dreamscape, crafted from the facsimile of a mouth. The words rang out with a horrible sense of need, a pressure that settled onto Mercury's shoulders.

A shockwave travelled out, centered on the monster, squashing the grass around it, forcing the stems to bed and break. It crashed into Mercury and almost sent him crashing to the floor. Then, it impacted old Uunrahzil, and slid off them like a stiff breeze.

But they retaliated.

Anger.

Mercury had never once seen old Uunrahzil angry. He had seen his teacher caring, protective, worried, amused. But never once wrathful, until now.

This wave was even more palpable than the last, though it slid off Mercury, since it wasn't focused on him. Instead, it crashed into the hungry, rotting thing of decay.

The thing's mana veins buckled.

Within a moment, half its appendages folded in on themselves, the stone writhing, compressing, then shattering and breaking into dust. Uunrahzil had torn its body in half with a single exertion of effort.

'Do not touch this one's student.'

Yet, the thing seemed unbothered. Its rotting maw closed for a moment, and its head slowly turned. Then cocked to the side again. It spoke, in thoughts this time, no longer ruled by desire, with half its body blown away. 'Old... Locrich'tyr?'

Dreamweaver froze. Stopped on the spot, seizing up. Mercury felt it. Felt their distress. The fear. The thoughts they had on that name - it was a piece of themselves they had banished and never wanted to return, yet now it was being ripped to the forefront by someone else's eyeun.

'Whisperstar! Think of old Uunrahzil, please,' Mercury commanded. His thoughts may have been a tad more desperate than strictly required. But he, himself, threw himself at the task with fervor.

It was as though he'd crashed into a molten iron wall. Burning hot to the touch, yet absolutely immovable.

As soon as Mercury pushed, his mind screamed in agony. That fae, the monster that wanted his star, its belief was far, far more powerful than anything Mercury could manage. But still,

he tried. Holding Dreamweaver close in his heart. Watching them write in pain and fight a name they didn't wish to carry.

Time passed.

Perhaps it was an eternity, or maybe just a moment, but when it was done, Uunrahzil had disappeared. Their existence had folded in on itself, twisting out into nothingness in that way they usually only did moments before Mercury grew awake.

Gone.

Just like that.

Hurt. Not dead, but *hurt*. Maybe forever. Maybe irrevocably.

Unforgivable.

Less than a second later, Mercury slammed the entire weight of his domain into the rotting divinity. That's what the monster had to be, after all.

Because, despite Mercury striking the thing with all the effort he could muster, there was barely a chip in their armor. Instead, the thing ignored him.

'Want.'

Again, that disgusting desire of decay rolled out, rotting the grass this time rather than just flattening it. 'Want,' the thing repeated, each syllable carefully mouthed as though the movement was alien. It was unnecessary, too. It didn't bother mimicking a voice box after all.

Desperate, yet still ever slow, they stretched out their appendages again. A soft, supple hand, the flesh on it appearing in a mimicry of life. Smooth, lazy, horribly soft skin rose on that hand, then plunged into the sun.

Mercury screamed.

His insides were burning.

Each and every cell of his screamed in agony. A horrible pain that went above and beyond anything he'd experienced. Like his very existence was being summarily dismantled.

A single moment later, Whisperstar came from the sky, slamming into the monstrous fae.

It bought Mercury a single desperate second - because he could see it. See the monster moving. Its single remaining sickle-arm snapping up to carve apart the young star.

So what? What could he *do*?

His abilities were worthless. The grass was crushed. He didn't know how to call on his dream itself-

Whisperstar was discarded, a broken husk. Wounds covered the kid's body, and Mercury felt fury flare up.

The other star in the sky shone brightly, the remnants of the nexus humming. Thin, weaving tendrils shot down, binding the fae for a moment. Every instant that passed, dozens of them snapped.

Ah, there was something, wasn't there?

Mercury sunk into ihn'ar as the last of the tendrils broke. The metal of the Dream of Starvation lashed out next. Dark steel slashed into the thing's body, cutting off its final sickle, but with a single moment of pressure, the metal was smashed into the ground just as the grass had been.

He broke the veil of gold a second before the pain was about to begin. He shattered iridescence a moment before his star would be torn apart.

Instead, he chose to do the tearing.

With a horrific noise, the <Dreamweave> itself ripped apart in front of the fae's arm. It had been reaching for the star, but there was nothing in between them. True, unadulterated <Nothingness>.

Instantly, mercury felt cold, desperate, clawing hunger dig its way into his dream, but at the same time, yet another arm of the fae disappeared into the hole, ripped apart by whatever horrors lay beyond it. Only one tentacle and one maw left.

A shiver ran up Mercury's back, when the tear in the weave moved. A shadowy, twisted limb reached in, grasping for the horrible fae that had almost killed Mercury. It was so fast the mopaaw couldn't even see it move, and a single blink later, the fae had lost another arm.

'Want.'

The desire rippled out again, accompanied by a horrifying stench of decay strong enough to push aside the freezing cold of the void of <Nothingness> for a moment. It crashed into the monster, forcing it to let go.

Without hesitation, the fae grabbed the edges of the tear in the weave, and pulled. Not to open it any further, but to shut it *closed* with simple force.

And it worked.

Inch by inch, the portal into nothingness began to close, the thing's final tentacle wrapped around both fraying edges of the portal. And Mercury helped. He needed the wound closed, desperately needed it to shut so he could live.

But he wasn't idle. As the thing worked, he activated <Veil>, hiding himself. <Unrestrained>, <Unbroken>, and <Itinerant> howled into existence at the same time, refusing to bend in the face of overwhelming odds. Refusing to let him succumb to anything.

Another shadowy arm tore from the rift, grabbing its edges to pry them open. A bulbous head covered in dozens of blinking eyes, made from shadowy flesh tore into the realm. It blinked a thousand times in a fraction of a second, as the portal still slowly closed in on its neck, like the world's worst guillotine.

Effortlessly, silently, it severed the thing's head from the rest of its body.

For a moment, there was silence. Then, that final tendril stretched for Mercury's sun again.

A moment later, the cut off head of the shadow monstrosity of <Nothingness> ripped the fae's head off.

The movement was brutal. The shadow flesh warped, one of the eyes blinking and turning into a maw between eyelids. Another eye blinked, and legs emerged from the opening, launching it at the fae.

With a sickening crunch, the mana veins shattered. It was fascinating to see, really.

Mercury had seen them cut before, but this was different. Wherever the shadowy teeth touched, the mana veins splintered, fractured, then finally broke. Splitting into a thousand tiny fragments.

What were they made of, he briefly wondered. Could he forge them?

Was he currently in a state of hyperfocus and delusion due to ihn'ar and the delirious pain coursing through him? Ah. Something to consider.

Still, his eyes tracked the breaking veins, watching the grey stone splinters, its edges a blueish-silvery radiant crystal that instantly dulled upon touching the air. Still, even after breaking, the stone would splinter again and again, until it was little more than grey dust.

Like a cloud of quartz sand, the fae that had almost torn Mercury's soul apart was sucked into the shadowy creature.

Then the shadow turned to the sun.

'Uh-oh,' was the brief thought that crossed Mercury's mind, before radiant pain enveloped his entire being.

A circle of shadowy wings sprouted from more of the creature's once-eyes. Instead of feathers, they seemed formed from dark, long, dense eyelashes. It flapped them once, turned into a blur and slammed into Mercury's sun.

Liquid agony coursed through him, and he lost his breath. Desperately, he shoved the pain to the side. Split his mind, leaving half of it writhing in agony. It wasn't enough. He split it again.

Anything to let the pain end.

Two zeyjns were wholly occupied by simple, flaming agony. His last one was small, flickering, a candleflame in a hurricane, threatening to be blown away any moment.

Mercury burnt, radiantly.

His sun shone, radiantly.

Ah. It was just a matter of perspective.

With a tiny twist of his perception, Mercury shifted his dreamscape. The shadow plugging in his sun was dark, yes, but his sun was more radiant. Mercury's mind was not a candle in a storm - it was a storm of fire blowing at a little shadow.

Another instant passed, then the agony was gone, liquid fire channelled into the annihilation of the invader.

Mercury choked. He tried to breathe but no air came. No matter. He was a construct of mana veins, here. If his <Astral Body> wanted air, he could damn well make it appear with a bit of <Rainfall>.

He did just that.

The air he summoned tasted of blood and ash and fire. Of the plains he had left behind, the land underneath that fucking crimson sun.

He'd left it *behind!!*

Tears streamed down his cheeks, falling into the charred, rotten, disgusting grass. He could cry? Why was he crying? This body didn't-

It did now. Ah, he had twisted the skill. His <Astral Body> was now very much in line with his physical one. And it hurt. His muscles all ached, his mind ached so much.

Mercury was back to being a candle in a storm, shielding himself from the worst of it by splitting his mind. His ihn'ar slowly faded away by itself. The gaps in the world disappeared, wrenched closed by the veil of iridescence. Then, his thoughts became calmer, when the veil of gold was drawn shut before his eyes.

His breathing steadied, then slowed. His heartbeat... oh, it had been going a million miles a minute. Bit by bit, that slowed down, too.

The danger had passed. He wasn't there anymore. Not in that infernal hellscape of blood and murder and death all around. He was out of there. He was out of there.

He was out of there.

Mercury took a slow, deliberate breath, feeling his snout quiver.

Then he took another deep breath, then a third.

Everything ached, but the pain was no longer radiant and all-consuming. As it always did, it had become a throbbing ache in the back of his mind. Every muscle felt overstretched, and his entirely self was frayed.

Opening the veils this much was dangerous. Then again, what else was he supposed to do? Tell the fae to please leave him alone?

Nope. That memory was shoved aside rather quickly when the pain threatened to resurface. Later. Distance, he needed distance.

But before that. He needed to check.

Despite his hesitation, Mercury walked up to the sun. The fae's shell had been destroyed, but he was sure that wasn't the last he would see of it. After all, the Dream of Starvation had also marked the thing... actually, the weapon must've consumed a whole lot.

Later. Later. Mercury tried his best to focus, though his thoughts felt fuzzy. There were things left behind by the invaders. The sun had burned the shadow to a crisp, and with combined efforts, the fae, too, had fallen.

Was Uunrahzil fi- Later.

Gently, reminding himself of the purpose of his actions, Mercury stumbled forward. He felt the warmth of the sun and it would have once been comforting, but right now it just felt... like too much. He was exhausted. Drained.

There no longer was grass where he walked, simply dry, destroyed ground. Coarse, jagged sands that would have dug into his paws if he were a normal cat... but he wasn't really. He was different. Eldritch. Magical. He was-

Walking forward, he gently reminded himself, strolling at the remnants of the fight.

In the middle of a circle of destruction, Mercury stopped. Grey metal hung listless on the ground. The Dream of Starvation was damaged, so much so that he could not even call up its description. But the metal writhed, reaching out for him, aiming to slide onto his paws. It seemed almost... sorry. Wanting to comfort him in its morbid embrace.

Mercury gently deactivated his call on the item, and instead, it formed a dull, lightless sphere, hovering below the frayed sun.

There was more on the floor, though. A pile of grey, quartz-like sand. A spectral fragment of antlers. He took both into his inventory. Somehow... descriptions for them didn't pop up either. Ah, he was so tired.

Forward, for now, he gently reminded himself. Just one paw in front of the other.

The trek might as well have taken an eternity, but eventually, he arrived directly underneath the radiant sun. It felt hot against his skin. Why did it feel so hot? Ahhh. What a pain.

At least he didn't search for long. There was a bit of shadow left. A writhing, moving piece of shadow, that seemed alive. Mercury knew it wasn't, though, and instead shoved it into his inventory.

So tired...

With a great deal of effort, Mercury dragged himself out from under the sun, closer to the moon. It felt calm. Steady. He held onto that feeling. Whisperstar laid somewhere near him, and they would live, he hoped.

He barely had the capacity to worry anymore. That felt... cruel. He really wanted to care. He did care.

So much pain had happened. Uunrahzil, Whisperstar...

The nexus, or what was left of it, hung in the sky, its threads ripped and torn. It was holding the dream together, but it was damaged, too. So was the sun.

Would it all heal?

They'd tried to steal his star. Part of his name. Yr'enzel. Star of hope. What... would have happened?

He pushed the thought aside. He would heal. Live. Thrive.

Make sure the star was never touched again.

With renewed resolve, Mercury closed his eyes. And his perhaps worst night of sleep yet finally came to an end.