

Chapter 221: Someone's Truth

[<Oceanic Consciousness> has levelled up! <Oceanic Consciousness lv. 3 -> 4>]

At the end of the night, Mercury still felt well rested. What wonders that Skill did for him. His minds, despite each one being put to rather heavy work, had taken it all in stride. Really, compared to the absolute mental battering that the surgery and Oberon had been, this was child's play.

Mercury took a deep breath, focussing on the shadows again. He had spent the whole night weaving them, after all. He now understood quite a bit more about them.

He could recognize which ones needed light, and which ones were gorged on it, for example. And he understood the way they wanted to form shapes naturally, and how you could manipulate them anyway, to move and go against their purpose.

Which was an interesting thing to study by itself, since he noticed that older shadows were easier to shape. Apparently, as time went by, the shadows became slightly less reliant on the things casting them, and more able to change their shape.

Of course, weaving them was still difficult. He had done so before, when fighting against Yearning, but that had been his own shadow, which proved remarkably good at following his commands.

Eventually, the ruler of Shadow stirred, and Mercury roused his other zeyjn from his mindscape. In the tub the ruler slept in, the darkness roiled and stirred until eventually, it coalesced into one form, that of a wolf.

For a moment it turned at Mercury and snarled hungrily. "Who are you? What are you doing in my room?!" it demanded.

"I'm Mercury, and I have been sent here to learn from you," he replied calmly. "In order to learn as much as possible, I've been assigned to sleep in the same room as you. Hence why there is a bed here."

Still wary, the wolf pranced to the side, eyeing the sleeping space with suspicion. "And why would I have ever agreed to let you study from me?"

"Because I have shown myself a capable healer, and promised to restore you to better shape if I learnt enough," he said. It was a bit of a lie, more like a half-truth, but accurate at the same time.

The wolf narrowed its eyes. "No one could have learnt of my weakness."

"Yet here I am, ruler of Shadow. You find yourself nameless, and I am good at finding the names of things."

Annoyed, the wolf snarled. "I'm in half a mind to kill you, right now," it said. A promise, rather than a negotiation.

"I'm also rather good at surviving, I'd say." This one was entirely true. Against a true ruler like Shadow, attacking him full force? He might not last long, but he was sure to last long enough for Omoria or Zyl or Titania or any other people who favoured him to save him.

"Leave my room, now."

Mercury bristled at the order, but bit his lips before he snapped back. "Is this out of a privacy concern?"

"Yes. Now lea-" Before it could finish, the shadowy form of the wolf dissolved into a puddle of darkness again. Then, it reformed, that time into the amorphous blob Mercury was used to.

The ruler looked around, disoriented, before their eyes fell on the mopaaw. "Ah. A good morning, Mercury. Did you sleep well?"

In response, he smiled. "Yes, quite decently."

"That is good to hear. Do you require more time, or are you ready to get started with the day?"

"I'm ready, simply act as if I weren't here at all," Mercury said.

It seemed to come rather easily to the ruler. Only a few minutes later they seemed to have entirely forgotten about Mercury's existence.

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"Are they usually so beside themselves?" Mercury asked Omoria, eventually. The tree was ancient, older than the ruler perhaps, and had known them for quite a while.

With a faint grimace, Omoria nodded. "Sadly, yes. People believe shadows to be formless and swiftly changing, so they are. I consider myself lucky that they have not faded yet."

"Lucky?" Mercury asked.

The tree nodded. "Very. This ruler may be consumed by their duties, but that is still better than someone incompetent. Shadow has stood against the void for many ages, thousands of seasons. I would not trust any scions of ours to hold that heavy mantle."

She spoke the words as if they were law, and frankly, Mercury believed her. The court of Shadow certainly had ancient, powerful fae. The one he encountered in the treasure hunt being an example of that. But at the same time, that did not mean that their court was unified.

Many of the fae that were powerful enough to take the mantle of ruler were too eccentric, and those with the mentality of ruling were too weak. Mercury sighed softly.

"When did they start to be like this?" he asked.

“Long ago. I didn’t bother to count. That’s a habit I’m still trying to adopt, but I think mortals tend to round when it comes to the hundreds of seasons, don’t they?”

Mercury smirked slightly. “Humans can often barely remember what they had for breakfast on any given day. Memory tends to be a little unreliable. Though I suppose here, some may have memory Skills.”

“Here?” the doll asked, raising an eyebrow. “What does that mean?”

“Ah, have I not told you? I suppose it’s a little bit of a secret, then.” He smirked. “Well, I come from a world that isn’t Chronagen. One without the system at all. No numbers, no magic.”

She looked at him with big eyes as the two of them trailed after the ruler of Shadow. They were doing their usual rounds, addressing smaller and bigger issues. Today there would also be some time where they would sit in their room, addressing the issues of the members of their court that people wanted to bring forward.

“How did you live?” Omoria asked.

“Well, lots of things didn’t. There weren’t any spirits, or fae, or anything, really. Just humans, and mundane animals. Things well suited to live off of only their biological functions.”

“That sounds boring,” Omoria said, pouting slightly and crossing her arms.

Mercury shrugged a little. “I dunno if I’d say so. There was plenty of conflict and excitement, even in the mundane stuff. Really, I think boredom is a thing of perspective - well, mostly. Some things are just mind-numbingly boring,” he added with a smirk, thinking of his old job.

“What did you even do?”

“Administration work. I was mostly responsible for documentation, calculations, and sorting files.”

She let out a small gasp of horror. “What an atrocious fate.”

At that, Mercury couldn’t help but snicker. “I suppose so. Well. I’ve gone through plenty of trouble over in this world as well, but still. I’ve also found myself quite a bit,” he said. “This place is hostile and unfair sometimes, but it also has agency. If I put my mind to something, I can do it.”

Omoria snickered, this time. “Well, that certainly is something to say,” she remarked snidely. “I think most people would disagree, simply lamenting their fate while unwilling to fight for it.”

“Well. I suppose being willing to put my life on the line every time something bothers me might be a bit of a unique attitude,” Mercury agreed. But that was who he was, now.

He wondered when that happened. When had he become the type of person to never back down? When had his dislike for authority turned into an absolute unwillingness to compromise his ideals?

Was that a good thing? Maybe not, maybe he could afford to be a little more flexible... but then again. Some people really did need to revise things, whether they wanted to or not. He decided to assess things on a case by case basis.

"It certainly is," Omoria said. "You know, we may be ancients, us faerie homes, but we are also people, in some ways. Well. I suppose I identify with that term more than some of the others may, but that's fine too. We live. We want, we desire. That's what it takes to be acknowledged by the system, did you know? Desire."

Mercury nodded. "Not exactly, but I've been told before that the system is based around what people want."

She nodded. "Certainly. And wanting something is a requirement to get it. Plants simply want to grow, so they gain Skills like <Photosynthesis>. That's one I have. Well, used to. It's evolved by now, of course."

"Naturally," Mercury smirked. He doubted every dandelion out there would have an evolved form, but for the ancients? That was rather predictable.

"So, when we want something and don't get Skills for it, what are we to do?" the girl asked. Her fist clenched slightly. "What do you do when you want something but don't know how to even start?"

A loaded question. Mercury thought it was probably emotionally charged. "I don't think there's a perfect answer to that," he said. "No one can solve every problem. I think it might often help to see things from a slightly different perspective. Take someone else into the fold, ask them what to do, the more different the better. Diversity is good for that. For perspective."

"Is that what you are? Perspective?" she asked, quietly.

"Here? Yes. In the fae realm, my perspective is radically different from what is prevalent among the rulers, so I am a foreign element. And it's causing change. Hopefully positively," he added with a smile.

"That doesn't mean you're powerless on your own, though," Alice remarked. "You can always try to apply your Skills differently, or try again and again to solve a problem until you find a solution. Tackle it from as many angles as you can think of, then try to think of more angles. I sometimes put myself into the mindsets of others."

Mercury glanced at the hero, thinking that those were quite a few words out of her when she was usually happy to observe quietly. Orin, too, seemed to react to this, nodding along faintly as she spoke.

"Right," Omoria nodded. "Both of your insights are accepted. I will think on this further."

With that, she faced forward again, following her ruler.

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When arbitration time came, Mercury found himself standing to the left of the central throne, filled by the ruler of Shadow. Already, he was working on his weaving again with two zeyjn, the third listening intently to the conversation at hand.

Disputes were being settled. Some very human ones, about land and privacy and food, and so on. Others were stranger, less relatable. What to do with tiny void infractions, where to find more shadows suitable for building, older ones having lost themselves needing to be buried.

Each time, Shadow made decisions. Sometimes, fae under their rule were sent to take care of conflicts. Crafters to repair things, executioners to collect the dead and dying. Mercury watched the decisions being made, slowly understanding more of the structure of the court.

Amusingly, it was different from humans, because fae never lied. Every single word was true - now, of course, they tried to sort that truth in such a way that it was as misleading as possible, but it was all technically true. There was no one who could deny something happening, it simply went against their nature.

They did have a rather important sense of honour, though less than he would have expected from faeries. The fae of Shadow were measured, often more languid and slow. But they still had a sense of pride, and did not enjoy having that crossed.

The heaviest accusation that could be levered against someone, for example, was that they were hasty. Shadows took things measuredly. If it could be done on one day, it could also be done another, could it not?

So, Mercury watched. Conflict by conflict went by, and languidly, the ruler of Shadow made judgments. Occasionally, tempers flipped quickly. Shadows were ephemeral, after all, and shifting from one moment to another was within their nature.

Really, it was only like a light source illuminated them from a different direction. Each manifestation of a shadow was, by definition, incomplete. A shadow of their full self. To be a fae of shadow... inherently meant being incomplete. Only ever having part of oneself show.

But was that part of being of shadow, or part of being alive? Was it a unique trait, or an exaggerated one? Mercury wondered. He watched. He learned.

[Your understanding of <Ancient Shadowweaving> has increased! <Ancient Shadowweaving (lowest) -> (low)>]

Mercury understood, just a little more. Slowly, he was learning.

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The day passed. And then another, and another after that.

Shadow was rotting.

Mercury could see it, plain as day. He saw it in every passing moment. In the languid agony that was so common among the shadows. They slinked around, never bothering with more than minimum effort.

Often, so many of them simply laid about, or followed familiar routines. Some of that was in the nature of Shadow, but then again, indulging that nature too much was what had caused the ruler to lose their name.

And he saw the consequences of that, too. Their sense of self was fragile. Whenever their shadow was illuminated from another angle, their personality would swap more strongly. They would forget bits and pieces, and engage entirely differently.

No one ever bothered to complain about their judgment either. Each and every shadow simply carried their lot. The only difference, Mercury noted, was the guardians of the void.

As one might expect, they were hard. Firm and cold. Trained to stand up for themselves, to keep their forms sharp and defined, to stand tall and firm against the darker darkness of decay. He hated any army, but here, he understood its purpose.

Agency. That was what Shadow lacked, he thought. The ability to choose their *own* direction, rather than be passively illuminated by some light. To fight against adversity, rather than just suffering it.

So he practiced his weaving more. He wanted to see something, see if he could cast shadows without a light source. What was a shadow, after all? Malleable darkness? A section with less light? What was light, then?

He meditated over it, deep in thought as he placed his mana in the shadows, then twisted them-

Placed his mana in the shadows.

Smiling, he withdrew the magical substance. He kept only a tiny trickle of it inside the shadow, using <Mana Expansion> to really see what it was made of. He looked, closely, with all his minds, breaking both veils with *ihn'ar*.

Suddenly, the fact that "shadow" wasn't really a substance seemed to no longer matter. Reality was malleable anyway. It didn't need to make sense. Really, it just needed to work. Curiously, since he could transform his mana into ice, could he transform it into shadow?

As the thought crossed his mind, Mercury decided that very logically, he should be able to. Really, he thought it might be easy, since he was rather familiar with transforming his mana. Suddenly, <Perceived Ease> and <Clarity> both triggered at once, and Mercury felt his mind expand and shift to let him take things in faster.

His eyes widened, unblinking. <Fast Learner> combined with the other comprehension boosts, and he began growing ever closer to a fundamental <Truth> about shadows. Bit by bit, the secrets were unveiled, and his *ystirs* rapidly flicked through hundreds of potential mana shaping exercises to create shadows.

Failure after failure, Mercury chipped away at the problem, and his titles started to contribute to the learning, too. Each mistake made him learn a little faster, each second he spent on problem solving magnified by his <Oceanic Consciousness> and his zeyjn sped his mind up even more.

Suddenly, his mana plummeted, as the fluid was used up, but his regeneration already worked on restoring it some more. More and more combinations passed through his brain, each one resulting in nothing. But he kept throwing his whole self into the problem, suddenly consumed with it.

This should be doable. Only a matter of time, frankly. He grinned maniacally, his eyes shining with a fire of discovery as he tossed his entire being into the magic. All his willpower.

Of course, the mystery cracked first.

After a few hundred or thousand tries, Mercury turned his mana into shadow, and wove it right after that. It twisted easily, naturally, as if always meant for that. Of course it did, this was a lightless shadow, after all. Malleable, but independent. It had inherited all his freedom.

Mercury grinned.

[Your understanding of <Ancient Shadowweaving> has increased! <Ancient Shadowweaving (low) -> (medium)>]

For a few more minutes, he enjoyed the sensation of his new creation, playing with the pool of darkness he had made for himself. A shadow that would eat light when given, but not be broken easily when harsher light fell upon it.

Was it perfect? No, of course not. Nothing was. But it gave him a hint into the nature of shadow, into the fact that it didn't need to be this way. That it didn't need to be languid and suffering, that it could be actionable and move *before* something else did.

Had the court forgotten that? The ruler of Shadow assumed all those properties of giving up easily, only going with the flow? Was that something he could fix with a quick reminder?

Mercury frowned faintly. Had he discovered the true nature of the ruler of Shadow or did he just find a type of shadow that was different from the courts?

No, that question was pointless. He was here because he was tasked to find the ruler's name, so he would simply watch even closer next time. He would unveil that secret, too.

With the decision made, Mercury let himself slowly drop out of ihn'ar. His learning Skills faded, and his mind returned to a more "normal" state, less influenced by the euphoria of engaging his curiosity.

He took a deep breath, calming his racing heart, and relied on <Hydration> to force his body to slow down a little. It had all sped up to provide his brain with more air, and with the Skill he worked on quickly reabsorbing the adrenaline and excessive endorphins the episode of intense focus had created.

Strangely, with that notion, he felt his own pupils contract. Mercury shook himself quickly, resetting his frame of mind, and after some more seconds he had calmed down.

“Appy, is that... normal?” he asked. His reactions had been growing more extreme as time went on, of course, but this was still quite a bit.

[Individual is stacking learning type Skills. Mental influences expected. Countermeasure: Deactivate Skills. Would you like to set automatic deactivation protocols?]

He hummed for a few moments, then decided. “Yes. Please deactivate them if you detect severe personality changes, or a significantly altered state persists for more than a days. Scale that time to be lower the more altered my state is, and only make it so if the change is caused by the Skills.”

That way his defenses wouldn’t be disabled while he was being mind controlled. Not that that was a likely scenario anymore these days, but he would rather be more careful than less.

[Some autonomy of assistant unit required. Authorise?]

“Of course, Appy. As much autonomy as you need.”

[Full autonomous permissions given, this unit will do its best to perform the duties implied in the given parameters. Thank you, dum-dum.]

With that done, Mercury took in the moment again, looking at the sleeping ruler of shadow. He watched them some more, though casually, letting his minds rest. A full <Witnessing> would need to wait until they were awake and ready for it, because the procedure might require some consent.

Going past a ruler’s passive defenses was probably possible, but certainly never going to be easy. So, he waited. Until the ruler eventually roused and their shape became more solid.

A snake, that day.

Mercury waited, until the snake slowly dissipated back into the amorphous shape the ruler usually held. He waited until their first round of tending to the shadows was done. Then he broached the subject, with Omoria, Alice, and Orin around.

“I think I know enough to go about finding your name now,” he said plainly.

Shadow turned to look at him, shifting and moulding as they always did. “Oh? You have reached the starting line?” They seemed curious, but not disappointed.

“That’s a simplification. From here on out I won’t need to watch you anymore. I’ll need to use some Skills to look at you, specifically, if that’s alright,” he said.

The shadow looked at him for a long moment, then let out a loathing sigh. “Fine,” it said. “Now?”

"Whenever is best for you."

"Then I am ready," the ruler said.

Its voice was heavy, but final. Mercury had rested his minds, keeping them as one and not using any of his focus Skills. He felt ready. Breathing deeply, he split his mind in three. By now, the motion was easy.

Then, slipping into ihn'ar, he shattered the veil of gold, then that of iridescence. The touch of the void felt cold as the world broke, but Mercury did not gaze into it, so it was nothing but a soft brush.

Instead, as the world fell apart at its seams, Mercury focussed all his intention on <Witnessed> and <Mana Expansion>. He called upon his <Astral Advent>, and everything that he was, all his life experiences, each and every last one boiled into this moment.

His whole self condensed into one pinprick of existence, then filled his physical body to its brim. Almost naturally, his mindscape manifested around him, reality superimposing itself onto another. He knew everything. His mana flowed out freely, seeping past the lowered defenses of the ruler of Shadow.

Within a moment, his weight of existence increased manifold, and a superpowered <Witness> slammed into the ruler.

[<Witnessed> has levelled up! <Witnessed lv. 7 -> 8>]

Mercury saw past all of the ruler's facets instantly. The kindness, the care, the hunger, the despair, the moments where it wanted to give up and lay down. He saw past each of the facets that were imposed from outside.

Bit by bit, shadow by shadow, he reconstructed the original being the ruler was. What hid behind the layers of obfuscation and perspective. Tricks of light shattered against him, as he dragged out each tiny veiled secret.

Seconds ticked by, and mercury dove deeper and deeper into the darkness. He understood every nook and cranny, saw it for what it was. <Truth> was separated from falsehood, as he made his journey deeper and deeper into what actually constituted the ruler.

Its kindness? True. The languid aimlessness? Imposed upon them. Mercury discarded it for the name he considered.

One after another, he considered each attribute, testing them, comparing them against his experiences, and the deep hidden desires of the ruler. And eventually, after bit by bit each layer of falsehood and imposed darkness was dismantled and stripped aside, he found the core of that creature.

At the very heart of the ruler there laid a simple desire. The desire to do the right thing. At the very heart of shadow he found integrity. And it had been buried, hidden behind a hundred thousand layers of other purposes and imposed principles. Fucking tragic is what that was.

Of course, that was not the only truth. There were a thousand more. A desire to be oneself. To grant agency. To live and see. To follow, to shadow some who deserve it, to eat up the light, and to stand against the darkness.

That ephemeral truth of being trapped at the boundary between light and dark was one that was core to shadows. It was in their nature, but it was also in their nature to go against their nature.

After all, that was what people always feared. Shadows moving and stirring. That fear was what truly gave them freedom, and it was part of their very being. Shadows were cold and dark. They were meant to be unsettling.

Not only languid or slow, they could move as fast as any ray of light.

Mercury breathed in deep, a storm brewing as he thought of a suitable name. Layer by layer peeled aside, he understood what was real, what was imposed, and what was desired. To restore and futureproof.

"What do you want to be, shadow?" he asked, his voice resounding through the dreamscape.

"I want to be myself, damn it," it said. No, it was a scream.

"Then that's what you'll be."

Having heard the decision, Mercury made a decision for the name. He discarded all the unsuitable ones, until only one remained, one of all the truths, an anchor so strong it could shrug off some more external influence than the court would have been able to without his help.

Within a moment, he grasped it, holding it tight in his mind, and let his Skills drop. His astral weight shrunk, his minds fused back into one, his roiling blood calmed, his mindscape dissipated. All that remained was a thin layer of <Rainfall> around him, letting him breathe.

"Your name is Ciarski."

As the word left his mouth, the darkness around him *boiled*.