

Chapter 190: Political Maneuvering

Sadly, Arber didn't have much more information on the seats of the empty thrones. They didn't know how many there were, or their names. They had been scrubbed off any record, including the memories of people.

That's why they were the empty thrones - no one sat on them. No one *had* sat on them, ever. Yet, it was the fae realm's worst kept secret that they were, of course, occupied. Then why still bother calling them the empty thrones?

"Do not ever call the thrones occupied," Arber had warned. "Calling attention to their existence will paint a target on your back. The thrones are empty. They have always been empty, they will always be empty. Understood, scallywag?"

Mercury could do little other than nod along. The thrones were empty. He... quite doubted that anything he did would remove the target already on him. But he would not provoke it.

Not yet.

The rage still burnt hot in his veins. His friends had been hurt. It was unacceptable. That thing would pay, no matter how long it took.

For now, he had different problems to face. Like the lady Witness. Arber had, eventually, taken Mercury back out from faer heart. Outside of which, Alice and the lady of the house waited.

The hero, for her part, regarded Mercury with a smile. She seemed happy, truly happy, that he survived. He also saw bags under her eyes, speaking of great exhaustion. What had she been through?

Before he came to a conclusion, the lady Witness made a sound akin to clearing her throat. "Arber," she chided. "You have brought a void-touched into your heart without my permission. Mercury, you have touched the void in my home. What do you have to say for yourself?"

Arber was about to speak, when Mercury snorted. "I died in your house, lady Witness."

Within a moment, dozens of eyes gazed heavily on Mercury's thin frame. He still looked smaller than usual, hungry. Thin to an unhealthy point, though his body was reconstructing the missing body mass already. The sap had left him more than enough energy for that.

"You did not-"

"My heart wasn't beating," Mercury interrupted. Was it rude? Sure. But then again, it made a point. "Given that my current shell is made from flesh, this seems like intensely severe damage. This occurred to me within your home, your Hospitality, and while watched by your retainer."

All he did was state facts, but the lady Witness narrowed her gaze. "Are you claiming my protections inadequate?"

"I am claiming that I was hurt, lady Witness," Mercury calmly retorted, "no more, no less."

The ice statue quiered for a moment, her fingers tensing. "Why were you void touched?"

Mercury stared at her. He calmly checked one of his notifications, still hanging in the air from the fight.

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

He had gotten closer to <Nothingness>. He had stared at it, ripped open the seams between reality, and let in the things beyond. Of course he understood it better. A small smile found itself on his lips.

"Would you... like a demonstration?" he asked.

Lady Witness recoiled in horror. "Do not defame my house like this!"

"Defame?" Mercury asked. "How so?"

"The houses are a bastion against the void," Alice explained, her calm, soothing voice ringing out in the tunnel. "They are symbols that the realm is yet living. And resisting the void."

The ice statue nodded. "Quite so. To bring the void into a house is the same as spitting on our entire realm."

"Hmm, I see. It will not happen again, then."

"Nor should it have in the first place," the lady scoffed.

"I shall kindly remind you whose duty it was to keep me safe. I shall also kindly inform you that you may wish to inquire as to how I got hurt. It was not due to the void, in fact," Mercury stated.

At that, the dozens of eyes on him changed, growing slightly wider. "It was not?"

"Nay. One of the thrones appeared in my dream."

Distantly, Mercury thought he heard the sound of tempered glass cracking and a heavy footstep. Something drew closer. He would have to be more careful in the future.

Lady Witness shivered. "No fae of that name exists," she whispered.

"And no fae like that has ever existed, yes, of course," Mercury replied with a smile. "And thus, my injury will remain forever mysterious, and the touch of the void on me is also something that never happened, yes?"

Very seriously, the lady of the house nodded, dipping her head slightly. "Of course," her chilly voice rang out again, entirely composed. "Nothing happened today."

Mercury smiled, hatefully. "Indeed. Nothing happened, nothing at all."

Then, in silence, they walked down the corridors, slowly heading further up, and up, and up. The trail of blood Mercury had left was already gone again, cleaned by servants or the wood itself, he didn't know.

Eventually, the strange quartett made their way into the large hall used for the recent celebrations. There were more tables set up now, all throughout, some as large as ones for a banquet, others only seating two or three people. Very, very few fae sat on their own.

All of them were, in some shape or form, having a meal. For a lot of fae, that means consuming some version of their element. Wood and ice, ash, dust, sunshine, plant matter and much more were consumed in various fashions. Crushed up and inhaled, devoured through maws of various sizes, absorbed through the skin and so on.

Mercury let himself be led by Arber again, passing more than a few familiar faces from yesterday. Once again, the retainer put up a slightly elevated path for Mercury to walk on, lady Witness splitting off again.

"Breakfast is an excellent chance to make alliances - or issue challenges," the fae-tree explained as their mannequin avatar strolled forward. "If there is anyone who terribly offended you yesterday, seat yourself next to them. Lady Witness will be challenging lady Whisperblossom, for example, for trying to lay claim on your retainer."

The mopaaw nodded. He didn't intend to offer a challenge himself though, especially not against the older fae around. Those were rivalries he did not wish to interfere with. It would, however, be good to establish some connections to young upcomers. That was a field he could fight on, and they would most likely offer him a challenge or two, anyway.

For a moment, Mercury got annoyed at how politically he was thinking, then shook it off. "There," he indicated to Arber. It was a medium sized table, seating eleven fae. Making it a full twelve seemed appropriate. All of them also had servants and retainers around, and the table was locked in lively debate.

Arber smiled. "A valiant choice."

Only a moment later, the path changed to accommodate their new goal. Some of the young fae turned to look curiously, but most seemed focused on the table, either consuming food as quickly as possible, or ignoring it entirely in favour of yelling.

As they approached, Mercury noted that he could not make out the words no matter how hard he tried. Onl when they were within two meters of the table did it feel like his ears popped, and suddenly it all made sense.

"You're a daft, ignorant piece of shit, Retulli!" a fiery lad spouted. His shell was mostly humanoid, albeit sporting four arms, each ending in three claws, and a wider chest than strictly necessary.

“And you are a hotheaded fuckface,” another fae countered, this one cold and of an icy disposition. Were they... wearing glasses? Yes, and the lenses were also crafted from ice, one with an iridescent sheen.

Calmly, Mercury walked up to the free chair, hopping onto it.

Instantly, the two fae stopped. The fiery one took his leg off the table, and the burnt wood quickly stopped smoking, then restored itself. His face seemed a little red with embarrassment. The icy one turned his gaunt, intelligent face to Mercury.

“Esteemed guest,” he greeted, his voice a little shaky. He had two grey horns extending upwards from a blue skinned face. He did have two eyes, a nose, and a mouth, though, making him seem rather human and approachable. “We did not expect us to join our table.”

Mercury gave him a polite smile. “I do hope I am not intruding?” He gave a small glance at the fiery fae.

That one was less humanoid. His skin was a river of lava, oranges and incandescent whites dancing along it. Four arms spread from his torso, and his face was entirely featuresless, though the lava bubbled as he spoke. His head was crested by a ring of horns and a cascade of charcoal hair. “No trouble at all,” he bubbled. “Simply surprise at your presence.”

“Indeed,” another fae joined the conversation. This one seemed to be from Blossom, judging by the flowers woven through their fur. “How do we deserve this honor?”

“As someone new to the realm, I believe its future to be more aligned with me than its past,” Mercury said, giving the heir of Blossom a small smile. This one he had spoken with yesterday, an ambitious fae, taking the shape of an animal Mercury didn’t know. But he already knew they had many plans in the fire, something he was now counting on.

A smile took to their features, though the bestial mouth seemed ill suited for it, looking more like a horrific snarl. “Indeed, it seems prudent. Unless, of course, one might see you as scared?”

He grinned, returning their smile. “Scared? Of the older fae? Not on my first visit - the challenges are really the only way anyone could have a go at me without my retainer intervening.”

Some of the more timid fae flinched at that. A young heir of Dust, and a squirrel shaped inheritor of the wild as well. Both were accompanied by servants, standing tall and proud behind the heirs of their courts. Those were being babied, then, and knew that they could hardly leave those eyes.

“I see,” the beastly representative of Blossom tested the words in their mouth. “Would this esteemed guest be amicable to a challenge, then?”

“Amicable?” he chuckled slightly. “I did not believe this to be a factor. If you wish to challenge me, simply come out and do it.”

Instantly, the inheritor of Scorch - or maybe he was of fire? - jumped in. "If the esteemed guest is willing, I would love to test our mettle."

"Certainly," Mercury agreed immediately. "What sort of competition would you prefer? I hear it is custom to test how one's elements stack up?"

He was baiting the young master into a suggestion. But the fiery fae was not quite up to the task of seeing that far ahead. "Certainly, that would be perfect. I will pit my fire against your..." he paused, expectantly.

"My <Rainfall>," Mercury supplied with a smile.

The fiery youth grinned, already sure of victory. "My fire against your rain, then! I am amicable to this. What will you bet?"

"If I win, I would like your friendship," he stated simply.

"Acceptable. If I do, I shall have your passion."

"You ask too much," Mercury said, his eyes narrowing.

"Indeed," the icy youth pounced, seemingly eager to see this perceived rival fall, "giving passion permanently is a serious sacrifice."

"For a chapter, then," the fiery youth admitted.

Mercury scoffed. "A season."

"Two, at least," Scorch's heir tried.

"Acceptable. I wager my passion of two seasons."

"The challenge is set!" the fiery youth said happily.

With a small nod, Mercury confirmed it. "I will be happy to test myself against you. Is there anyone else who would ask something of me?"

A hand was raised.

It was shadowy, shifting, unable to keep a single coherent shape, it seemed. Mercury guessed it might be the Court of Shadow, or perhaps one of the keepers of the Void. Those who kept the realm as one, despite its ongoing degradation.

"I wish to lay claim to your emptiness," the shadow demanded. Certainly a keeper then, probably still disguised as a heir of Shadow. Their form was shifting, their voice a hollow sound, like an empty room. For now they seemed... serpentine.

"That appears vague."

"So it seems."

“And the contest?” Mercury asked, tilting his head. Where was his food, too?

The moment the thought crossed his mind, one of the servants placed a plate in front of him. He smiled, taking a small bite as he waited for a reply.

Once more, that strange, dull voice spoke to him. “One of shape.”

Mercury shook his head. “It seems you feel the need to shift the odds in your favour?” he asked, adding a disappointed tint to his voice.

“... No.”

The other scions, however, pounced. A feminine voice, an heiress of Dust Mercury guessed, spoke. “Shadows shift always, and yet you ask someone with a vessel of flesh to a duel in changing? Pitiful indeed,” she giggled.

Slowly, the shadows shifted. “You choose.”

Giving an understanding smile Mercury spoke. “Perhaps a battle of imagination would be more fair? Similar in nature, but less favouring to someone of your constitution,” he suggested. It was, of course, not similar at all. <Daydream> would let him effectively crush this kind of competition.

At that thought, another notification popped up.

[<Daydream> has levelled up! <Daydream lv. 9 -> 12>]

[<Daydream> has met the necessary qualifications for evolution! Evolve? (300 Skill Points)]

Right, that had also happened after that night. Mercury quickly brushed it away mentally - there were many things to go through, but he would have to move them to after the breakfast. For now, he had more political maneuvering ahead.

The shadow slowly bobbed its snake head. “Acceptable.”

“So the deal is struck,” Mercury said with a smile, biting down on some of his food, appearing slightly careless, but guarded. “On a victory, I would like your perspective.”

“Acceptable,” the shadow bobbed its head again.

“Then, if anyone else wishes to challenge me, you are free to do so anytime today. I believe that the games will be going on for longer, too?”

“Indeed they will,” the squirrel confirmed his suspicions. Its voice was squeaky and timid, but seemed passionate. “I am excited to see your matches, esteemed guest.”

“Call me Mercury,” the mopaaw said. “You are scions of your houses. Do not bring shame to them by showing me undue respect.”

That elicited some chuckles and affirmations of his morals. The atmosphere grew a little less tense. Until, of course, it was challenged.

It was the icy scion, the handsome one, who did so. "I do have a question if you'll permit my asking it, Mercury?" he asked.

"Go on."

"You see, as scions we are privy to many secrets, but not yet all. What has brought on thine visitation of the realm?" the calm voice probed.

Mercury smiled politely. "Ah, I played a role in the closing of a long open archway, not much more than that," he said.

"I see," the scion of Chill nodded along. "Thank you for your answer."

"Must've been one hell of an arch if it got you here," the fiery one said. The icy one shot him a glare filled with an air of superiority.

The scion of Chill had figured out that Mercury was underplaying his achievements, and tactfully let it go, but it seemed that message did not click with the representative of Scorch. Mercury expected it, though, so he just had to play along. "Not that incredible, I assure you. Simply special in other ways. It was a waning realm."

That quieted the table slightly again. Even the fae sitting further away turned to him now. "That does seem of interest to the courts. How come this arch decayed so far?" a new voice asked, belonging to a mellow, curious seeming girl with skin seemingly made from clouds and hair from mist.

"It found very little to sustain it, that is all I know. I didn't get to look into it much, busy trying to survive."

"Of course, yes," she said, giving a flustered smile. Her meal seemed to be puffy ballad of clouds which she simply stuck into her "hair" where they dissolved. She had no mouth to speak of, after all.

Another small lull occurred at the table, then Mercury threw the smart, icy guy a look. The scion understood, and gave a small nod, permitting his question. "I truly did not mean to interrupt your conversations. What was going on before I came to the table?"

The scion of Chill sighed. "My veritable friend, Asher, was struggling to comprehend the fact that violence is not the prime solution to all problems?"

One of the Asher's eyes would certainly have twitched had he had any. Instead, all he could do was reply. "I think what Misha means to say is that he's a *coward* and a poor fighter!"

Before the young representative of Scorch could step on the table again, his retainer placed a hand on the shoulder. The retainer was a large humanoid in a suit, though their entire face was simply one huge eye, that hovered above a grey neck. Their whole body seemed elongated, their arms having too many joints.

One of those arms, and a hand with spindly fingers laid on Asher, who slowly settled back down in his chair. "Yes, yes," he said. "No destruction."

The bestial girl scoffed. "You'd think he was born of desolation."

Asher's head spun. "You dare compare my court to a house?!"

"No, I am comparing *you* to a house. You do not have the noble bearing of one of the courts," the beast elaborated.

For the first time, the heir of Dust spoke up, a star shaped from debris. "That is a significant insult to bring to bear. Is it backed by Blossom, or one of your own design?"

That made the beast stop. "My own," it ground out from between teeth clenched in anger. Small giggles and chitters erupted across the table, suddenly turning Blossom into the butt of the joke.

Mercury took his time, watching and listening as the hostilities made their way around the table. He noticed soft alliances. Picked out who was more calm, and who was savvy, and who was passionate.

None of the qualities were superior to one another, but knowing more about these scions would let him play them more easily. Not that it took much effort to have them turn on each other. None of them wanted to take the slightest step back, ever.

Out of them all, the squirrel, Iryndryn, and the heir of Chill, Misha, were the best at maneuvering. Dust enjoyed fanning the flames, seeing things crashing down. The bestial representative of Blossom, and Asher of Scorch were most passionate.

The shadow snake, who Mercury suspected to be a veilwatcher, was the most impassive, not partaking in much of the goings-on. The girl made of clouds, too, seemed ready to pass by most grievances, though she was one of the most curious, asking Mercury about the other world.

Overall, the talk went well, Mercury thought. He had finished enough food for his body to be rebuilt in perfect shape, and his stockpiles of <Nutritional Preservation> to be quite full. The breakfast was slowly coming to an end, and people were retreating.

He shot Arber a look, and soon excused himself from the table. He would certainly be seeing most of the scions again when the time to partake in challenges came. No way would they want to lose out on seeing their fellow heirs humiliated.

But before that, he had notifications to look through. His head hurt at the thought, and he still felt sore deep down to his very core, but it needed doing. He would do it, then.

At least the evolutions were something to look forward to.

