

Chapter 195: Bloodsports

Mercury would have preferred a third day of challenges over what was happening.

There was no breakfast on his fourth day in the fae realm. Instead, they headed downstairs to find the main hall had shifted into an arena. It would be a day for blood sports and betting.

Unsurprisingly, Mercury did not, in fact, enjoy that practice. He had been moderately okay with it in human cities, since it was more of a profession for adventurers to train their Skills, but here? These people weren't exactly doing it by choice. Nor did the matches generally end with the participants leaving alive.

After seeing the third head chopped off, Mercury was disgusted enough.

So many pointless deaths. Around him, the fae were cheering, while Alice and Arber sat in silence. Asher seemed to be excited, but at least kept faer mouth shut.

"Is there any way to stop this?" Mercury asked, after only half an hour of murder after murder.

Alice shook her head. "No." She didn't seem to want to elaborate further.

"This is judged as fair competition by the courts," Arber explained instead. "These people were claimed fairly, as per fae rules, and are now allowed to struggle for their lives. Letting them fight is seen as a privilege."

"Right," Mercury said, clenching his jaw.

He hated it, but for once, there was nothing he could do. This was, as far as he understood it, as inevitable as the challenges. It was simply what happened at gatherings of the courts. There were bets being made, small exchanges of valuable materials, enchanted trinkets, sometimes even territories.

No one traded in Skills here, at least. It seems that direct trading of power was only approved within the challenges. Mercury spotted the heirs he had interacted with again. Misha of Chill, apparently, seemed rather good at guessing the odds and who would win, continuously winning large gifts, and only losing smaller ones.

Mercury himself refused to bet on it. Getting up and leaving would have been a breach of hospitality, and he could see a few people gaze at him with interest, even glee at his discomfort.

He shut it out. Focused on his meditation and abilities. Rather than listen to the song of steel and pain, Mercury tried to listen for the wind, softly rustling through dry, leafless canopies.

It was distinctly different here, in the fae realm. Back on Chronagen, in stormbraver, the wind was usually wild, stormy, but here? It seemed subdued, fearful. No, perhaps that wasn't right... Mercury felt that it was waiting.

As if, when the world was unaware, it would strike.

Now that he thought about it, a lot of the fae realm felt that way. Like a thinly veiled threat, a knife always at his throat. The constant need to be attentive was like a grindstone he was being tested against.

In that way, the challenges had almost been a relief. Simply being able to go ahead and crush someone in a straight up conflict? Easy. There was no need to worry about being stabbed in the back, or being sufficiently interesting.

Now, too, he cast it all aside. There was a spectacle going on, and while it was a horrible practice, it might pacify the fae for long enough that he could get a glimpse of what this realm was like.

Mercury had a lot of senses at his disposal, by now. He could feel the shadows, hear the wind, know where grass grew, but all of it felt muted in the fae realm. The wind was waiting, the grass had been burnt, the shadows... were so vast that he almost didn't dare look at them.

It was hard to get a grasp on the entire realm when he usually remained within the confines of Arber's tree body. Now he had a chance to explore.

But he needed to do so *carefully*. This place had already demonstrated clear hostility, and attracting monsters certainly wasn't covered by the Hospitality of his First Visit. That would be too easy.

So, Mercury looked sneakily. He extended his senses slowly, only slightly, a whisper on the world. He felt what the wind touched by asking it, he felt the tiny droplets of water in the air, and felt the mana with his own.

That was the strangest experience. The mana he felt foreign as well, but not in a bad way. It felt old, but without the stagnation. It showed none of the decay of the fae realm.

Because everywhere else he looked, he saw the decay. The stagnation. The lack of innovation. Trees had grown tall, then old, then died from lack of resources. The air outside was stale, with so few things breathing and interacting with it. The water had long since died out, worse than even the leeches that once plagued Ruvah.

In every nook and cranny of the realm, he could see it: without even *ihn'ar*, he saw that the fae realm was dying. It was vast, and powerful. Creatures that were unfathomable to him, almost entirely untouchable. But its own twisted rules had brought along its downfall.

He knew it. Fae clung to the old, they clung to what was ancient. Immortals could never let go, after all. They needed to have and have and have. And they had sucked the land they lived in dry.

There were vast forests all around mercury, but the floor didn't have grass growing from it. Instead, it was covered in dead ash. The trees were husks, burnt out shells of their former selves. Rotten to their core.

And despite all that, he knew that they would still cling to live. Desperately, the old had a chokehold on the new, snuffing it out to prolong itself for moments longer.

It was really all encapsulated in the dilemma of the empty thrones, wasn't it. Fae so ancient, everyone had forgotten their names. Rules so old that they should long have been dead, stricken from the annals of history, never to appear again.

Yet the moment something new, he, set foot into this realm, they came. They came to plunder him, to rip out what made him special, take it for themselves, with the vain hope of preserving their existence for another moment.

He found it despicable.

History was something to learn from, not something to drag out into the present. The empty thrones... the world was dying, yet all they cared about was existing a little longer. Even people like lady Whisperblossom craved something new, anything interesting at all.

It was decay, from top to bottom.

With that in mind, Mercury opened his eyes. He had seen enough of the forest, there was nothing new to be found there anymore. It was ash, as far as he could see. There were other regions further away, cold ones, hot ones, strange ones, he knew that much for certain.

But he also knew that this sickness was everywhere in this realm.

Now, he wasn't going to go on a cleanse, set it all on fire so something new could grow, but there certainly were changes needed. If the fae did as they wished, kept dragging mortals in, they would simply be devouring other realms in vain attempts to stabilize. It would never work.

And, because they were fae, they would take more. More bodies. More blood.

"Unstoppable," Mercury whispered. The fight down there in the arena couldn't be stopped, because he did not have the power. Not... yet.

But he would change this realm. The realm would change itself, really. It was, simply said, necessary. Because it would either change or perish, forever.

Arber glanced at him slightly, turning their avatar at his expression. Mercury was staring at the arena blankly, barely registering what was going on. Instead, he was focused on what he wanted to do. He had been making allies, of course, but why was that? Why make allies with heirs who would never be crowned?

Why enter challenges to understand people whose elders would never move out of the way?

The courts mattered. They were powerful and large. But beyond them, there were the empty thrones. The broken husks of rulers that should be gone. The courts, themselves, were in the middle of collapse, but hung on by the powers of their rulers.

It all needed to come down.

Mercury resolved to tear it down.

Not right now, but slowly, as he gained power. He had things that needed dismantling, so life could grow. He wanted to explore the fae realm, see what it was truly like, when it wasn't in the throes of death.

But first, before all of that... the seats of the empty thrones had to go. They were first. Then he would take down the deserted courts, the ones that had already died but clung to life, then the current ones. This realm deserved to live, it deserved better.

With resolve, he watched blood spilled on the ground, his expression set into an unchanging mask. Not yet, but soon. He knew it, and lady Whisperblossom did too. That there would be change, or there would be death.

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On his fifth day of the fae realm, there were more bloodsports to be had, but this time, it wasn't to be simple fights among regular abducted people. No, this time... it was what the fae called *the hunt*.

Promising individuals, prodigies, or unlucky adventurers who the fae had an interest in were released in the forest, and told to live. Then they would run, and be chased by hordes of giggling, ephemeral fae, until they encountered beasts that either roamed the forest, or sometimes were crafted for this occasion.

Grafted monsters of flesh and chitin roamed between the trees, their shadows looming tall and dark.

The first champion was... a teenage girl.

Mercury heard the courts tattle about how she had ended up in this situation. Stumbled into the fae realm on her own, then asked for help from the first fae they encountered. She then thanked the fae for that help, too.

Now, she was in an even worse position than where she had started, but the fact that she made it to the fae realm on her own surely meant she had some sort of hidden ability?

The monsters tore her apart.

It barely took a moment. One of the things, chitin and blades, pounced from atop a tree and chopped her in half, then that was that.

Her unique Skill? Apparently it was called <Wayward>. It brought her to strange and unexpected places more often, passively. That was all.

The next challenger was an elf. Mercury had never seen one before, but they were just as he expected. Long, flowing hair, androgynous body, suntanned, olive skin, and sharp ears. They'd a bow slung over their back.

This time, the chase was more interesting. The elf ran, as soon as they were permitted too, and it was a wise decision. The place they'd stood was immediately attacked by some kind of rhinoceros-thing.

It was only the beginning of the chase, though. The elf wove through the trees, leaping off branches, sprinting across the ash without disturbing it for a moment. Their emerald eyes darted around, looking for any escape routes, but they were simply met with more forest.

Behind them trailed the fae courts, giggling masses of Blossom's leaves, wisps of ethereal fire for Scorch, and so on it went. They giggled and laughed, chasing after the elf, who slowly grew more tired.

After an hour of chasing, and narrow escapes from three monsters, a swift one found them. Some sort of large praying-mantis type thing. A single swipe of those sickles, and the elf fell over, dead.

Mercury grimaced.

As always, after the death, their unique Skill was revealed. The elf had possessed some type of danger sense to avoid the beasts, as well as a unique Skill that made them nearly untraceable. That was how none of the branches they stepped on broke.

Not that it saved them.

Of course, the fae had prepared, and the next challenger was only a moment out. A young boy, whose hair seemed to sway in the breeze, though there was none. He looked light on his feet, smiling even. And Mercury recognized him.

It was *Breeze*. The wind that had visited him in stormbraver. What was he doing here?

Before Mercury could finish the thought, the hunt was on. The mopaaw watched Breeze stretch, tapping their toes with their fingertips, rolling their shoulders in an exaggerated manner. No monster came for them.

Then, Breeze *ran*.

Within a moment, the ash covering the ground was blasted aside, caught up in the vacuum Breeze's run created. A moment later, there were crashes as trees snapped at the base, then a louder, harsh cracking noise.

Either Breeze had broken the sound barrier, or, and more likely given the blood Mercury saw as the fae followed, broken one of their creations apart.

And, almost amusingly, as the fae followed, Breeze simply ran for longer. Ten minutes, then fifteen, and then, they vanished. Gone, just like that.

"They've escaped," one of the fae declared. "Back to the other realm."

Grumbles were exchanged, until the next challenger appeared. But still, Mercury wondered how Breeze had gotten there. Maybe they'd followed him? Through the door that was conjured when he went to the fae realm?

Delayedly, when the next challenger was brought about, Mercury heard a whisper. "Come back soon, Biso." It was Breeze's voice, and their nickname for him. He felt strange at that, but quickly schooled his face back to neutral, eyeing the next contender.

His glance at them did not last very long. After five minutes of chasing, they died. The contender after them died as well.

Eventually, though, they brought out a decrepit looking old woman. She held a walking stick, and her back was hunched. She had apparently made it on the fae realm by seeking it out, the murmurs went.

Found a passage and passed through it. Said she wanted to partake in the hunt.

The fae, of course, eagerly agreed, simply to see what she was up to.

Seconds ticked by, then the hunt began. This one started close to a monster, because the swift praying-mantis that had decapitated the elf instantly appeared from between the trees. It struck the old woman, but her staff was already placed where it attacked.

She hadn't moved particularly fast, but the creature had struck her defenses.

A moment later, a second collision rang out. The old woman had moved, gently positioning the staff behind her, smoothly beginning the motion the instant the creature vanished, and completing it just in time to block the second swing.

"Now, now," she chided the insect. "Settle down, would you?"

The creature chittered, then struck with its other sickle from below... missing the woman. Then, she lightly placed a hand on the lethal blade that had just passed by her hand.

With a crash, the insect slammed into the ground. It was as if gravity had suddenly increased a hundredfold. Its chitin cracked as it sunk into the dried forest soil, and ash flew away in a cloud.

Slowly, the woman lowered her staff to the floor, then began walking as she hummed a happy tune. Her staff made a rhythmic tapping sound on the ground. By any means, she looked to be an old woman taking a leisurely stroll through a wintry, leafless forest.

Another beast appeared, but this one slammed into the ground in much the same way with only a glance. The woman kept humming.

She walked for ten minutes, crushing another three beasts in the process. They simply folded in on themselves, though they didn't die. The final one hadn't even spotted her when it sank to the ground.

Eventually, she stopped, in a small, open clearing. She looked back at the chittering fae. "Now, is this far enough? How much will you drive this old woman? My hips are aching, you see?"

Silence spread among the courts.

"I was told that this was a hunt. What do you want me to hunt for you? Go on, let me do a favour then cash it in."

Once again, none of the courts answered.

The old woman breathed in and out slowly, her breath leaving in a small, frosty cloud. It wasn't particularly cold in the forest, Mercury noted. She closed her eyes for a moment, then opened them again.

"My hospitality is wearing thin."

At that, one fae laughed.

The woman pointed her staff, and the creature, a humanoid figure made from thin sticks, as though a child had drawn it, folded in on itself. A tiny marble of dense, almost black wood was left behind.

This time, the silence was deafening.

"What do you want?" lady Witness eventually asked.

The woman smiled. "Ah, lovely. Someone reasonable. I would have my wife's name back. She's been terribly sad since losing it, you see, and I can't have that."

Lady Witness looked at her. "Do you know which court your wife dealt with?" she asked.

Smiling, the old woman shook her head. "No, no, the courts wouldn't get her name out of her. She's too sly a fox for that. This was done by one of your hungry old fogeys. The thrones—"

"There are no fae of such name," lady Witness stated intensely, her many eyes unblinking.

"Fufufu, forgive me," the woman chuckled. "Of course there are not. But you see, that would mean my wife's name is lost. And that... that would be a real, terrible shame. Especially since I beat your challenge, you see? I was invited for this by one of you, let me see..."

She pointed her staff into the crowd, but no one was crushed. Instead, it was levered at Misha.

The heir of Chill wore a slight smile.

"This one, that young man invited me here," she said. "Surely, that means you must pay up. Give me the name of my wife back."

"I do not own it," they calmly answered.

"Right, I see. Then would you be so kind as to provide the identity of the fae that does?" she asked.

Misha smiled. They glanced at the courts, their gaze lingering. Silence hung heavily in the air at that moment. Then, finally, their gaze landed on Mercury. "I do not know a fae of such name," they said slowly.

"But this one? The mopaaw. They... may have encountered someone. If such a thing is possible, after all."

The woman slowly turned, then smiled. "Oh, I see." She gave a small bow, her lone robes rustling as they ran over her wrinkled skin. "Greetings. Are you amicable to granting this old woman a wish? I have completed your challenge, after all."

Mercury saw, then. This was a plan, by Misha. "This is not my challenge at all, esteemed elder," he said, leaning on <Diplomacy>. For a moment, rage crossed the woman's eyes. "For I am not a fae. I will happily assist you in this. *However* your favour with the courts still stands. This *is* their hunt, after all."

"But you will be assisting me."

"That is correct."

She smiled. "I see. Then, does your young soul have any wishes you would make of the courts? My favour is yours, after all."

Mercury looked at Misha. The fae simply smiled, calmly and placidly as always. "Yes," he said slowly, taking his time. What kind of wish should he make?

Demanding traditions be abolished would be too much, too soon. No, this had to be a reasonable, individually completable request.

And what did he need most from the fae? There was something, yes. Something they could give him. This realm was where the empty thrones were. If he intended to hunt them down... he would need to be able to come back anytime.

"My request is simple. I wish for Arber to be my retainer whenever I am in the fae realm, rather than just this first visit. I additionally wish for the ability to come and go from the fae realm as I please," he said.

The first one was an insurance policy. If Arber was his retainer he wasn't exactly untouchable, but he would be much harder to target.

Lady Witness gave him a long look, and Misha's smile turned wider. "That is acceptable," the lady said, "so long as Arber agrees."

"Aye," the tree replied promptly. The avatar was weaker this far out from their main body, but not gone. "I accept."

“Fine then,” the lady said, tossing Mercury an item. He easily caught it with <force of the Hecatoncheires>, then brought it close enough to see. It was a small key carved from translucent ice, and a small eye carved in at the base. At least it didn't blink at him, that was a plus.

“The key will bond with you, in whatever way you touch it first. May it serve you well.”

Now, a part of that stood out to him. “In whatever way you touch it first.”

Mercury, very gently, reached out with his *astral* body, rather than his physical one. The feeling was strange, like a small pulling at his skin, but without any visual sensation, the key vanished a moment later, when his physical paw was just a hair short of touching it.

[Astral Bond Established.]

He was right.

If he'd touched it with his physical paw, it might have been a blood bond. For all he knew, the fae might even think it was blood bonded, but it was not. As long as his astral body existed, it would remain bonded with the key.

Then he nodded. “This payment is acceptable. Thank you for sharing this boon, esteemed elder.”

She smiled. “Please. You may simply call me Daryel.”