

Chapter 218: Rules and Rulers

Mercury stood before Oberon, the king's might weighing down on him like a heavy blanket. He faced it calmly, breathing slowly.

Not that he did it effortlessly. After the surgery, Mercury felt tired. Drained of effort and interest. Still, he thought about the favour closely.

There were lots of things he needed help with, but his bargaining power wasn't that high. If he asked the king to support any decision he made in court, that would absolutely be shut down and seen as an insult.

What to request, then? Nothing too cocky, nothing too simple. The king began tapping his foot as Mercury thought.

"Well?" Oberon asked.

"I'd like to ask your permission to pass through Mellow's lands unobstructed by your court," Mercury stated.

The king's eyes tightened into slits of glaring yellow. "You wish access to my lands, for however long you wish?"

The mopaaw shook his head faintly. "Not quite. I understand there are some places I should not go. Nor are you obligated to protect me. I would like to be allowed into any place belonging to no fae in particular in your domain, as well as all places whose primary owners permit me into."

"We are under no obligation to protect you," Oberon stated simply. "If you perish it will be your responsibility only."

"Of course," Mercury nodded. "I would ask you not to specifically create trouble for me though."

The king scoffed. "Fine then. No trouble? I can do that. But I refuse to chain all fae under my banner. If they choose to engage you, feel free to treat them as you would any other stranger."

Mercury nodded again. "Acceptable."

"So the covenant is made, and the debt repaid. As you have permission to move here, you may go or stay. Orin will return you to Arber whenever you wish." With that, Oberon waved Mercury off, dismissing him. "You, tree. When will you be able to house the court of Mellow again?"

Sibori looked at Oberon. Slowly, xe tilted xir head. "I don't know."

Oberon paused. "You do not?"

“Actually,” the brambled shell of ebony spoke, “perhaps there will come no such time.”

“... None, you say.” The king’s voice trembled faintly with fury, his eyes blazing with the smell of ozone.

Sibori nodded. “Faerie king. It is in your service I was driven to death, and in this death, that I was *released* from your service.”

Oberon’s gaze flared, and landed on Mercury with the pressure of a descending waterfall. “This was not according to our agreement.”

Drawing <Rainfall> around himself like a mantle, Mercury weathered the king’s anger. “I was asked to communicate. Revive, if I could,” he stated. “Never was I told to make you a servant.”

“You break my trust, foreign creature,” Oberon hissed. “The spirit of the agreement was to bring it back the same.”

“Then you should have requested as such, faerie king. I speak the <Truth> when I say my part of the covenant was fulfilled,” Mercury ground out. It felt heavy, and he was almost wheezing, drawing <Rainfall> even tighter.

Oberon’s fury flared harder. “So it seems. You are banished from here. Go. This is my land in Mellow. And everything upon it belongs to me. So your permission to be undisturbed is revoked.”

As the king spoke, Mercury felt a budding resonance with those words, but it never bloomed. Not in the same way that Sibori’s expression of gratitude did. Not in the same way that Hospitality did. Nothing happened.

“King. That is wrong. This land was yours when you were my liege,” Sibori said. Xir voice was quiet, almost a breathless whisper. “But it is not, now. It is mine. My land. Filled with my essence.”

Oberon bristled further, the crushing weight upon Mercury now making his knees buckle. He felt fatigued, but still. Instead of falling, he drew upon the Skills he had not used too heavily, and remained standing. He breathed in, then out, waiting for the king to speak.

“So it seems you have abandoned this court of mine,” Oberon said, stomping his foot on the ground. The winds ceased, the earth shook, and all at once the scavengers flew up to disappear. “Name me a reason I should not extinguish thy flame now.”

At that, Sibori’s wood snarled. The dead bark shifted and creaked, forming maws. “I kindly request that you do not. I am sure we can come to a more amicable agreement.”

Oberon scoffed. “House my court, then, ancient tree. Or see thineself felled.”

Mercury gave the two a long look. “Sibori. You are not bound to be here. You can move,” he said.

At that, both froze, then the fury of the faerie king turned upon him again. "You bring back what is mine only to attempt to steal it, Mercury? True to your nature, <Usurper>."

Yellow blazed forth from his mask, the air smelling of brimstone, and crushing pressure on Mercury. The mopaaw could do nothing but give him a blank look. "I do not steal. But my position on your servitude has been made rather clear. What I do is give choices. To both Sibori and you."

Once more, the pressure grew heavier, and Mercury felt his metal prosthesis begin sinking into the wood. Then, Alice stepped forward.

The pressure lifted.

Half a step in front and to the side of Mercury stood the heroine. She stood up straight, even in front of the faerie king. Wordlessly, Alice stared him down.

"So, the half breed has joined the carriage of change, is that it?" he spat, furiously. "I see how it is. So, then, tree. What are your terms?"

"Sibori," xe said. "My name. It's Sibori. I am Sibori."

Oberon stared. "Do not kid me."

The avatar returned the gesture patiently. "Say it."

For a moment, Oberon looked as if he would pick this as the hill to die on, but eventually, he abated. His eyes closed behind the mask, the yellow glow fading to a dull darkness behind the mask. Then it reignited, more gently. "Fine then. Sibori. Name your terms."

Faintly, Mercury smiled. Sibori nodded at the king. "I wish to establish house rules, with the ability to remove fae who cannot keep to them from my premises."

Oberon waved his hand. "Granted. What else?"

"I will change the landscape to suit my vision. It must not be treated with respect."

"Fine, too," Oberon readily agreed. "Is that all?"

Sibori thought. "Ability to choose the human workers here."

"Certainly," he said with a faint huff. "Anything more?"

"Yes. Contact to the other ones. Arber, for one. Each of the spirits," xe made their final request.

Oberon, for once, took a little longer. "Sure. Granted too. In exchange, you will grow your form out to house the members of this Court again. Stabilize the realm around you. Be willing to host banquets and other rulers."

"Acceptable," Sibori nodded. Xe may have had no face, but Mercury still felt some happiness from the avatar. This deal had worked out just fine.

“Good. The mopaaw may stay as long as he wants to, then, assuming you are amicable to his stay?”

Sibori nodded again. “Quite amicable.”

“Then my duty here is done,” Oberon stated. “Orin will stay here as long as Mercury does. Should they break your rules, simply deposit them somewhere outside. I will have them picked up.”

The fae, for the first time since the conversation started, began moving again. They had been so still that Mercury almost forgot they were there. Poor sod. “I- I will make sure to behave appropriately.”

“Good. Then I shall take my leave,” Oberon spoke, then vanished in a gust of dry leaves.

And the world was silent.

Mercury took a few moments to regain his bearings, as Alice’s aura ramped down again. The sparkly flares of colour he usually saw around others had expanded about her when she was holding back Oberon’s fury.

He wondered a little what had made the faerie king so placid at the end, but soon discarded that thought. He focused. Things were not done yet. “Sibori, do you have enough energy to regrow yet?”

The avatar gave a hollow cackle. “Brababa. No, I do not. But I have enough to make some shelter. Please, simply be patient.”

With a nod, Mercury moved back alongside Orin and Alice, giving the revitalized tree the space he needed.

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Mercury took the time to lay down in the snow. He closed his eyes.

In front of him, the noises of creaking and cracking wood followed. The carcass of ebony, much of it having turned to ash, the rest shifted and distorted, was beginning to once again stir. Mercury felt the moving carcass, then ignored it, keeping his perception shallow.

He felt tired, so he let a second zeyjn fall asleep, keeping only a small part of himself awake. Enough to function largely normally, though exhausted. He let most of his skills drop, too, keeping only their minimum passive effects active.

“Exhausted?” Alice asked, her voice pleasantly quiet.

“Yeah,” Mercury agreed. “Not exactly easy work.”

“That makes sense,” the heroine nodded. “Necessary, though.”

“Agreed,” he replied, still keeping his eyes closed. So dang tired. “Think there’ll be beds?”

"I'd hope so," Alice said with a chuckle.

"You would?"

She tilted her head a little. "Am I supposed to not be tired? Have you seen me sleep?"

"Doesn't one of your items remove that need?" Mercury retorted.

Alice shrugged. "A few of them reduce it," she explained. "Not remove. In fact, I'd wager I technically need the sleep more than you."

Mercury didn't exactly have a good retort to that, so he just gave a small chuckle, then focused on resting. His breathing slowed, and time passed quickly. The cool snow felt nice against his fur.

After the few dozen minutes that Sibori took to prepare the room, Mercury felt better. He awoke to the tree's avatar calling out to him.

"Mercury. The room is done. Care to join us inside?" xe asked.

Cracking open an eye, Mercury rose from the snowy ground, shaking himself slightly to clean his fur. <Hydration> rather quickly helped him shake it all off. He felt a bit better already, and seeing the small wooden hut in the middle of a crater where the wood had been eroded made him smirk.

"Of course," he said. "Let us head inside."

Feeling the faint crunch of the snow underneath his paw, Mercury walked forward. His body still felt heavy, but not overbearingly so. He breathed the clean air, letting <Rainfall> dissipate into only a thin shell rather than the mantle he usually kept it as.

It lightened up the strain on his mind. Mercury felt... comfortable. What a strange feeling in the fae realm.

With the debt of gratitude Sibori had promised him, he didn't need to feel unsafe in xir company, and Orin was oathbound to protect him. The envoy of Mellow had, by now, fused their multiple bodies back into one, though he doubted all versions of them had been here.

Still, they were coming along peacefully. Whether they were a potential ally or someone who might cause trouble remained to be seen.

When Mercury walked inside, he was only faintly surprised to see that the cottage was bigger than the outside would make one guess. It even had a second story that was entirely hidden when looking in.

A staircase led up there, and Mercury could feel that it had soft mattresses as his mana explored slightly. Doing the surgery had given him significant practice with his sensory abilities, letting his shadow sense and mana expansion catch up with his sight somewhat.

Now, he took the chance to see the aura around Sibori. He hadn't bothered before, because it was so faint and flickering from lack of life, but by now, the avatar was blazing brightly again, with green vitality and dark, earthy streaks.

The tree spirit was a beacon of life. As they had requested from him, they felt stable, clumps of earth and moss forming within their aura and dissipating again. But at its core, that light coming off them also felt solid, unmoving. A worldview one could break themselves upon.

Sibori had the absolute determination to stand by xir ideals until death do them part - as it very nearly did.

"You're lost in thought," the avatar noted.

Mercury smiled. "A little. I'm pleased."

"How so?" xe asked, tilting xir blank face.

"This. You made something. The decay's stopped around here. Slowed down in the entire realm for a little while," Mercury said.

Sibori thought for a moment, then gave a faint nod. "I see. You care quite significantly. Will you not become exhausted at this?"

"Never," Mercury shook his head. "My ideals. My <Truth>. I'm still learning more about them, but they're what makes me, well, me. When I make a decision I want to make it with my whole heart. So, I don't think I'll grow tired of it, no."

"Hm," the tree hummed, then nodded. "I see." A moment of silence followed. "Would any of you like to drink something?"

Alice smiled. "I'd love to."

With that said, Sibori began to work. A hearth and chimney, all made from solid wood, lit up with a fire inside, warming the hut. It reminded Mercury of the time spent in Irrithuriel's cottage, bringing a small smile to his lips.

The avatar of the tree took a teapot, also made from solid wood, and placed a mix of snow and sap inside, sweetening the water slightly. A branch grew from their shoulder, sprouting dry leaves, which they crushed and added into the mix, leaving it on the wooden stove to let the snow melt.

Drinking leaves grown from someone else's body still struck Mercury as strange, but given the humming Sibori did while setting up the tea, it didn't hurt them. He smiled a little at the strange thought. Customs in the fae realm had to be different, with these creatures being so far removed from humans.

"I'm curious. Isn't there some rule about eating fae food?" Mercury asked.

Alice smirked. "Yes, there is. Generally, unless food is specifically offered to you, you shouldn't eat it. But when food is placed in front of you, the intent also matters. If you are a

guest, invited in, then poisoning attempts or games to garner your debt are rarer. Do beware of it when visiting other houses though.”

“You are quite famous, too, Mercury,” Orin said, joining the conversation. “I doubt many would try to play games with you. Queen Titania seems to have assigned you as a valuable asset.”

Sibori rapped the brambled knuckles of one of their limbs across the table. “Some fae fear nothing, though. The older ones, more powerful ones. They feel immune of consequences, only seeking joy. Beware their games.”

“Aren’t you one of those?” Mercury asked with a bit of mirth.

“Brababa. So it seems. But I also owe you a debt of gratitude.”

“Ancient spirits of the trees are also far less likely to attempt tricks,” Alice added. “They are known as protectors, rarely engaging in the posturing of the courts, since they are vital to this realm.”

Orin leaves seemed to rush a little faster at that comment. “Vital,” they said, their dog-like face distorting slightly. “Yet so many courts place no value on them.”

“Mellow themselves ruined theirs,” the heroine nodded. “You saw how Oberon acquiesced to the requests. Sibori can effectively make any house rule they want.”

“Xe,” Sibori corrected. “I’d like to use xe/xir as my pronouns.”

Alice nodded with a smile. “Right. Xe can make any house rule xe wants, and the court will have to obey.”

Mercury nodded. “On that note, do you already have some ideas, Sibori?”

The fae hummed, the hut shifting slightly around them, as more wood grew and morphed. Apparently, the spirit was still at work even while talking. “Well,” xe hummed. “Some. No damaging the place, or the garden, for one. No direct harm towards other visitors. No entering rooms one is not wanted in. Mercury, do you have any specific wishes?”

He tilted his head. “You want me to decide your rules?”

A bit of mirth radiated from the avatar. “Certainly. You wish to change this realm, just like I do, no?”

“Hmmm,” Mercury hummed. “Your help is appreciated. Then, I’d like to make some requests. Any non-fae coming here must leave in the same or better condition than they arrived. And if there are servants, they are to be treated with the highest respect.”

“Acceptable,” Sibori nodded, finally taking the kettle off the stove, and pouring the hot tea into wooden cups. “Those are rather reasonable.”

"I'm hoping they'll encourage better treatment of non-fae. The casual cruelty and disregard on display has been rather disgusting," Mercury said.

Orin stirred at that. "Why do you care about our treatment of them so much?" they asked. There was no malice in the question, just a genuine curiosity. "Are they really worth fighting the rulers over?"

"It's about the principles of interaction," Mercury said with a faint shake of his head, taking a sip from the tea. It was delicious. "If you engage with a lack of kindness towards the world, you will eventually break something. Humans, for example, have no trust towards the fae. If they engaged more kindly, perhaps entertainment could come about naturally and more frequently rather than forcefully."

The fae hummed and thought, rather than arguing immediately. They hadn't been present during the discussion Mercury led with the rulers. "I can't say I see yet," they said. "But I suppose that I will be accompanying you for longer. I hope my understanding will grow."

Mercury nodded with a smile. "Perspective is a difficult thing. It's not something I can give you with only a few sentences. But I'm hoping to slowly impart it on this whole realm as time goes on."

Mellow's envoy simply nodded at that. Silence hung for a little while longer, as Sibori worked, and the room warmed up. It felt a little awkward, but not too bad. Mercury felt quite fond of wooden cabins.

He looked at Orin for a longer moment, taking in their aura. It felt like he was only seeing a segment of it, but he could already see some character traits come through. It was a storming, flickering thing, always flitting here and there.

It seemed like they were a somewhat curious, playful person with strong intuition and a desire to experience everything at once. Seeing such a strong want to explore was nice, because Mercury knew himself that he had it as well.

One day, he wanted to see everything the starlight touched. Well, probably more than that, even. Maybe he could delve deep into the oceans at some point? That would be fun.

A smile crept onto his lips as he thought about his future plans. They talked a little while longer, finished their drinks, and then headed upstairs. The mattresses were also made from wood, amusingly, but it was a flexible fibre with lots of air pockets, making it rather comfortable, actually.

Then again, with Mercury's vitality he could probably sleep well on a slab of rock. Smirking at the thought, he drifted off to sleep. He didn't need it, but a well rested cat could definitely seize the day better.

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Misha was standing over a bunch of plans. It had all been moving so fast since Mercury entered the fae realm. They smiled at the thought of the mopaaw, the agent of change.

Things had been turned upside down, one after another. He didn't buckle to the rulers. Won all his challenges. Played games with creatures far more powerful than himself. He bowed to *no one* and when the consequences came he faced them down.

What an inspiration.

Dragging a hand through their hair, Misha revised their plans again. They had been plotting and scheming for so long they hardly remembered what it was like to live leisurely. But that was fine, it was all for their goal, all for that one end.

From the beginning of his existence, Misha had been made into a scion. Trained in the ways of the courts, trained to trick with the truth, to betray and backstab. To be devious and deceive and disciplined. All those lessons were imparted in gruelling detail.

And so they'd been learned, applied, and structured. Misha had made allies, made enemies, schemed and worked to rise. They were, perhaps, the most promising scions to the rulers, yet they hadn't even seen the half of it. Misha's games ran deeper.

They had been carefully measuring their contacts with Yr'enzel. The changebringer. Not too much, not too little. Just a casual relationship, one of faintly good intentions. The ruler of Chill had been brought onto Mercury's side. And he had known Oberon's pride would bring their downfall.

Misha had made sure to rile up Asher of Scorch, making sure Mercury challenged him. Now, the two had developed a bond, and that suited the fae just fine. As long as they were tied together...

The scion of Chill took a deep breath with a grin. The courts would change, inevitably. Misha would make sure that their vision overlapped with Mercury's. They'd scheme and change and alter things to make it all go as well as it could. And when things changed, they'd use it to climb a step higher.

It was a win-win for him and the mopaaw. Now all that was left was picking out a loser.

Which of the rulers would need replacement, the young scion wondered?