

Chapter 194: A Statement

Mercury met Orvyn again in one of the domes meant for challenges. Ethereal light enveloped the world around them, cutting them off from the other fae.

The heir of Blossom smiled, a ferocious, wild expression. "What will it be first, Mercury? Truthfulness or trust?"

"Truth," Mercury said. It was always a better choice than dare.

"Do I get to ask first?" Orvyn replied, and once he nodded, she asked faer first question. "What do you want most?"

"Freedom." It was an easy answer to an easy question. But being truthful meant providing context. "I can't stand being forced to make choices. Thinking of my life in someone else's hands is unbearable."

Orvyn tilted her head. "Are we not always in another's hands?"

Mercury smiled. "Only if you don't rip those hands apart."

The flowers of her body twisted into a cruel smile. "I see," she said. "There is a saying, here. That to struggle against your purpose is akin to a bug in a spiderweb."

"Maybe I must simply struggle harder than any bug before me, then," Mercury shrugged with a smirk. "At least I will know I've fought. But now is my turn to ask a question. Who are you, Orvyn?"

She blinked at him for a moment. Then her lips pulled back, and she released a loud, sudden noise, somewhere between a bark and a roar. It must've been laughter.

"Who am I? That is quite simple, I am an heiress of Blossom," she said, as if it was the most simple thing in the world. Then, for a while she was silent. Slowly, the colours around them shifted. The ethereal green turned a slight red. The arena was beginning to judge her answer incomplete.

"Oh my," Mercury taunted, "only the first question and you are providing me with half a lie, Orvyn?"

The monstrous face twisted into a frown. "Hmph. I see how this works, now. Fine then. I am someone who struggles. For every inch given to me, I'll fight, never bending or breaking. I am a shifter, and will change who I am to suit who I need to be. I am hungry for power. I wish to know *why* I am, so, I suppose, at the very end, I am a seeker of just that: purpose."

The arena judged the answer adequate.

"What is your greatest fear?" Orvyn asked.

What an insidious question. Mercury gritted his teeth slightly. It was sneaky, and a little annoying, but he could answer it. “Irreality. I’m still terrified that, one day, I’ll fall asleep and wake up to see that everything I do was worthless. That it was all some kinda fucked up feverdream. That everyone I ever met isn’t real, that everything that’s happened didn’t mean anything.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Why is that?”

“That is another question, I believe,” Mercury said. “For now, I would like to know your biggest regret.”

Orvyn snarled a little, but still answered. “Opening that fucking *door*. Never should’ve done it. The amount I’ve lost...” she shook her head, then saw the encroaching red. “That’s not enough?” She huffed.

“Fine,” Orvyn continued. “Truthfulness. This was shortly after I became fully realized, only about thirty-five chapters after I crafted my first shell. We had a door back at home, one that was forbidden. Sealed. The temptation was too much; of course I opened it.

“And I lost a lot. Because, of course, the door led to a prisoner. Someone who was shackled, and broken, twisted from isolation and desperate for conversation. So we talked. And I lost pieces of myself. My first name, gone. My first shell, gone. My first *existence* winked away, leaving me with no memories past that point. I became a *puppet*,” she growled.

That was judged as a truthful enough answer by the arena. “Those are unfortunate circumstances,” Mercury said, his empathy genuine. “Your turn to ask.”

“So it is,” the shifter huffed. “Let me see... your worst betrayal?”

Mercury smiled sadly. That... memory was painful. “It was from my first best friend. I loved him, you know. Had a crush and everything. I told him, and he told the leaders of the education establishment. Those told my parents. And then, I went through a long period of suffering.”

“What’s his name?” Orvyn asked.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“I would like to hurt him if I ever meet him,” she doubled down. “I would like to know his name.”

“Oh, I doubt you’ll ever meet. But fine, yes, his name is Ron. Short for Ronald,” Mercury said.

“This ‘Ronald’ will pay if I ever meet him,” Orvyn said intensely. Strangely, Mercury believed her.

“That is a kind sentiment. But it seems like my turn to ask. What drives you?”

Orvyn looked at him for a long while, silently. She shifted her shape once, and her weight side to side. Eventually, she replied. "Desire. The want to move forward. Spite, to see how far I can go. Revenge, to a degree, and I suppose I want to find fulfilment. To be rid of hunger."

Mercury nodded, then let her ask a question again. "Why do you want to be free?" The question seemed curious, now, rather than mirroring her original desire to win.

"Because I deserve it," Mercury said. "Everyone does. I lived with shackles and expectations, and I dislike it. I can choose to care, I can choose to take on duties, but I never will take on chains I cannot discard. Because it's suffocating, it isn't like me."

"Untameable," Orvyn nodded. "I respect that."

The mopaaw gave her a thin smile. "Why are you always hungry?"

"Because I have to be," she said, shrugging. "It's the only way to survive. Eat or be eaten. I learnt it when I opened that door, and I do not need to be taught twice."

"I see."

"What would you do to someone who hurt a companion of yours, Mercury?"

"Get recompense. Whatever is needed. An apology, material rewards, or revenge. I've confronted dragons for my friends, and I would again," he said.

Orvyn smiled faintly at that.

"Do you want to win this competition of truthfulness?" Mercury eventually asked her.

"Yes," she said.

The arena turned red, detecting a lie. Mercury had won. The heiress of Blossom looked at him, faer face frozen in astonishment. Then, she barked out another laugh. "I see," she said. "You really set me up for that one. So did that servant! What a plot. Did you have this all in mind from the start?"

Mercury smirked. "Not in the slightest," he admitted readily. "I just noticed you could never admit that kind of defeat, but didn't hold hostilities to me anymore."

Orvyn shook her head, throwing a handful of leaves into the air around her. "You truly are strange. Fine, then. Let us move onto this challenge of trust. Would your retainer act as arbiter?"

"Acceptable."

The moment Mercury confirmed it, Arber stepped into the arena. "I will be posing hypothetical scenarios. You are to decide if you would trust the other in them. Convince yourselves, for any lie will be detected."

A moment passed, and when both of them nodded, the faceless mannequin began talking again. "You are in a burning building. There is a door to the outside, but it is jammed. Your respective other is on that door, do you trust them to unbar it and allow you to escape?"

"Yes," both of them replied. Nothing more happened.

Arber smiled. "Next scenario. You are being assaulted in a dark alleyway. Your respective other notices, do you believe they will come to your aid?"

"Yes."

"Someone says a rude comment to you, calling you a beast. Would your respective other speak up?"

"Yes."

"There are two streets. A carriage is barrelling towards five people. If your respective other changes the course of the carriage, it will kill only you, but spare the five people. If your respective other chooses to do nothing, the five will perish but you will live. Do you believe your respective other would keep you alive in this situation?"

"Yes." Mercury knew that Orvyn cared none about other lives, but he was surprised that she also felt safe. The glint in her eyes told him, though. She simply had faith he would find a way to save all six people. Also, how did Arber know the trolley problem?

"Let's assume you needed to undergo extensive modifications of your vessel due to some injury. Would you trust the other person to slowly replace all parts of your shell yet still have you maintain yourself, thus remaining the same being?"

"Yes."

"Would you willingly entrust the other person with your life?" Arber asked.

"Yes," Orvyn said without hesitation. She knew herself, she knew Mercury now. He was, surprisingly, not the kind of person to backstab something like this, so she trusted him.

Mercury clenched his teeth. "No," he said. Because he wouldn't entrust others with his life, if he could ever help it.

"The challenge is over. Orvyn of Blossom wins this round. In total, you have achieved a draw. Congratulations, challengers."

With that, Arber's mannequin vanished again, off to the sides to watch other matches unfold.

Mercury turned to Orvyn, giving her a long look. "Why would you do that?"

Orvyn smiled, that same, feral expression she wore at the parties as the dome went down. "We are no longer in a competition of truth, are we? I owe you no answer."

"That is correct, I suppose," Mercury lamented with a sigh. "I think it was worthwhile, though, learning more about you."

“It did come at the cost of feeling like this was all planned by that old woman.”

The mopaaw chuffed half a laugh. “Fair enough. It does feel a little like that. I don’t find myself particularly minding, though. Do you?”

She shook her head. “A little, perhaps. But I shall be off, now. I think there is more for me to do.”

“Oh?”

“I have challenged others as well. Some less witty than you, Mercury,” she said, this time with a more amused smile.

“Ah, I see. Good luck then!”

At that, Orvyn nodded, then stalked away. Mercury himself returned to Arber’s side. The tree’s avatar gave him a short nod, then turned back to supervise the challenges.

Minute by minute ticked by, and eventually, Alice came out from another dome. She was, once again, covered in dirt, her clothes torn in places and caked in dried blood. Despite that, she smiled at Mercury.

“Your challenge seems to have gone well?” she asked.

“It did,” he readily agreed. “Yours seem... draining.”

The heroine shrugged. “I’ll live,” she said. “And then I’ll do it all over again.”

“Let me do the next challenge in your place. If it’s something I can do, I mean.”

At that, a few heads snapped into their direction. “You sure this is a good idea, Mercury?” Alice asked, but he simply nodded.

“Definitely. This is to prove a point.”

“What point?” she asked.

Mercury smiled, showing his fangs. “You’ll see.”

And indeed, they didn’t wait long before someone came up to the strange trio. Asher was still in a challenge, after all.

It was someone from a lesser court that Mercury hadn’t heard of before, that of Sunshine. The fae asking for a chance was, in that vein, a somewhat humanoid avatar made from light. Though their arms were more nebulous clouds.

“I would like to challenge the hero, Alice.”

“And what kind of challenge would that be?” Alice returned quickly.

The sunlight fae smiled. "A simple contest of domains. My light against whatever you choose."

"Acceptable," Mercury intoned. "I would like to partake in this competition in Alice's name."

"Acceptable," the fae agreed.

Once Alice had nodded her assent, too, Mercury and the fae headed off to an arena. On the way, Mercury was curious. He had defeated Asher in a measurement of domains before, essentially. Despite that, this one was confident.

Had his victory not been overwhelming enough? Did this one think they had something to directly counter his skills?

"What are we wagering?" Mercury asked, once inside the arena.

"One level of mastery to be transferred from the loser to the winner, to a Skill of the winner's choosing?" the fae suggested.

"Acceptable," Mercury nodded, then they both took their positions.

A moment later, the challenge began.

Instantly, the sky above them cleared, bright rays of sunshine tearing through the clouds in the facsimile of a sky the arena made. It felt like a scorching summer day, light spilling from the heavens and onto the earth.

So that was why they were so confident? Because Mercury used <Rainfall>, and their domain countered his?

He smiled. They didn't really think that was the only trick in his arsenal, did they? Sure, his other things weren't "domains" exactly, but then again, <Rainfall> was also only an application of ihn'ar, right? So he could, surely, use them as well.

With a small twist of his mind, he sunk into that familiar state, calling out to <Grass> and <Wind>. The former, especially, thrived under the sunlight, growing taller, while the latter kept the heat at bay.

Slowly, he called out to <Water> as well. There were, after all, tiny amounts of it always in the air. Oftentimes there was more water in the air on hotter days, since hot air could hold more of it before it condensed.

So, he called out to those tiny bits of water, and asked them to partially condense, into a fog.

Slowly but surely, then, the imaginary field was coated by mist. The grass hungrily soaked up the condensation, growing even thicker, and the wind cooled it down enough for more water to condense on the verdant ground.

The sunshine slowly seemed unable to penetrate through that layer of mist, though it was still more than present. But closer to the ground, there was now the cover of darkness, which Mercury could exploit.

Across from him, through the fog, he knew that fae made of sunlight still stood, enforcing their will on the sky, bringing down beams of bright heat. Their efforts were only intensifying, but Mercury was dead set on winning this. Crushing them, even.

With another twist of his mind, he broke past the veil of gold. No longer confined by reason, Mercury came up with many more ideas, and the confidence to enforce them.

He quickly reached out with <Ancient Shadowweaving> and <Ice Magic> to change things around. By pumping his mana into the mist, he cooled it down, resulting in a tinkle of tiny ice shards to fall from it.

Then, the shadows grew deeper on the floor, mixing slightly with the mist. Suddenly, the sunlight didn't refract as much on the water droplets anymore. The mist slowly went from white to gray, as the sunlight simply bounced off.

Which then cooled it down more, letting Mercury's ice magic take greater hold. He smiled. "Cold and dark," he said.

Then, slowly, he reached out to <Nothingness>. Not in the same way he usually did, either. He had touched upon it as the void in between stars before, and as the horrors lurking in the depths, but now, he simply reached out to what it was in its name: nothingness.

The antithesis to things that "are". For now, all he really needed it to be an antithesis of was the stuff above his mist. Past the golden veil, that was an easy idea.

Mercury looked at the sky and wanted it gone.

Then the sky vanished.

The temperature dropped more, to the point where <Adaptable> began making his fur thicker. Mercury didn't care. Through the darkness, tall grass and icy fog, he began walking forward. He knew where his foe was, despite the fact that there was no light to see.

Instinctively, he reached out to <Rainfall>, in a more general stormy way. It mixed with the howling wind and the tinkling ice, absorbing those into itself, and spreading through the mist. Suddenly, he felt it all. Every single tiny bit of hail that crashed from the mist to the ground.

He could tell that they were falling through the sunlight-fae, but not dealing any damage, since it was incorporeal. But he had also entirely dismantled its domain, and trapped it within his. It would probably start to take more damage when he moved closer.

So that's just what he did.

Slowly but surely, one step after another, Mercury moved closer to the fae. His curtain of <Nothingness> stopped the fae from bringing back the sun, dousing the sky in darkness. A

quick glance revealed it was patchwork darkness, strangely, kind of like the sky in his mindscape.

Not too long later, he stood in front of the fae. It looked at him, and he looked back at it.

“So, here we are,” Mercury said, calmly.

He didn’t receive a reply. The thing of sunlight simply seemed to tense up and redouble its efforts.

“I really don’t wanna do this, you know?” Mercury said. “But then, you had to challenge my friend. And I had goobers like you come up to me all the time. Even now, you thought you would win, handily. You were so confident.”

Mercury sighed. “So unfortunately, you’ll have to be my example. So, you can either lay down on the ground, and remain that way until I am back with my group, or I can show you what a slam fucking dunk looks like.”

The fae looked at him silently, still focused on conjuring their sunlight back, even more desperately.

“Slam dunk it is,” Mercury lamented with a sigh.

With a command from his mind the freezing mist and chilling darkness all gathered in one spot, suddenly pressing down on the fae. Mercury saw the sunlight that constituted their shape flicker for a moment, but didn’t relent. He pressed down on the fae with <Wind>, <Water>, <Ancient Shadowweaving> and <Ice Magic>, while pulling them to the ground with <Grass>.

They didn’t last very long.

It only took maybe half a dozen seconds before their nebulous lower body buckled, slamming their torso into the ground. Mercury redoubled the pressure, pushing them down, leaving an imprint on the frozen earth.

The luminescent shell of the fae was pressed further in, until their back was flush with the ground mercury stood on. “I think you should yield,” he ground out, teeth clenched in concentration. Managing all that with only one ystir was troublesome.

Once more, no reply came, other than the fae shining a bit brighter. But with a bit of <Nothingness>, all that extra light soon fizzled out, like a glowbug crushed beneath a boot.

Mercury didn’t entirely like that analogy. Carefully, he poked the fae with a paw. “Hey, uh, if you don’t yield, I’ll just call Arber over. They’ll judge this match as over real quick, no trouble.”

At that, the fae finally deflated. “This one... yields,” they croaked.

A moment later, the fog, grass, and wind disappeared, leaving the arena just as it had been when they entered. The dome faded, and the sky returned to normal. Mercury smiled, untouched entirely, while his opponent was still in the dirt.

“I’ll see about that Skill now.”

Instantly, a menu with multiple of them opened up. A couple aligned with his, and he spotted evolutions of simple Skills like <Dash> and <Stealth>. There were a lot of Skills related to sight, and brightness. But there were also some that sounded like they would enhance understanding. Those seemed the most appealing, and he took one of those.

[Acquired the Skill <Bright Mind> through a transaction!]

[Similar Skill detected. Fusion with <Clarity> possible. Would you like to fuse?]

Was this a good idea, Appy?

[Advancing existing Skills is generally recommended over acquiring newer ones. This is the reason different evolutions of Skills are harder to gain once turned down, mastery that would go towards acquiring them is instead incorporated into other Skills, changing their function slightly.]

Alright. Fuse.

[<Clarity> has levelled up! <Clarity lv. 4 -> 5>]

He felt the world grow a little sharper. The effect was more pronounced than with a regular level up, since he got the mastery from someone else, and also slightly different, since it came from another Skill. It felt... easier to pick out colours. He kind of liked it.

With a thin smile, Mercury trudged back to Alice and Arber. Asher was there too, now, having won his newest challenge, and seemed quite pleased about it.

Once there, he quickly explained how it went to Alice, who shot him a bright smile. “You certainly did make an impression!” she said. “This should have you sorted for a while. Proving your power in such direct conflict twice, and winning so overwhelmingly this time...” she gestured at the fae, who was just now rising from the hole he had pressed them into, “well. Let’s hope the message clicks.”

It did, apparently. He got more requests from more powerful fae, but those were easy to turn down. None of those old monsters really expected him to accept at all, even when the battlefield seemed equal.

Who knew what kind of Skills they had? Maybe some of them could fool even Arber. Staking parts of himself on those kinds of bets, even when the contests seemed to favour him, was not a worthwhile risk.

Alice accepted any challenge uttered against her, however, and also won each and every last one of them. Sometimes easily, sometimes with difficulty, but she would win without fail.

The amount of challenges she got was also reduced, however, after Mercury's show of force. None of the younger fae came up to them anymore. It was almost enough to say it was calm.

And so, the second day of challenges drifted by. Luckily, there wouldn't be a third.