

Chapter 184: Strange Shapes

Mercury stepped through the doorway, keeping his face neutral. As soon as he and his guide were through, the opening snapped shut behind them.

In the fae realm, the atmosphere was different. The air felt frigid, hostile even. His instincts told him to be on guard, and with every new gaze landing on him, <Intuition> rang more alarm bells.

Alice, too, joined them, not through Tiranor's gateway, though; she simply appeared in the air next to Mercury. When she did, there was a strange phenomenon. Suddenly, <Intuition> told him that the general danger had dropped, yet the individual danger posed by each fae seemed to have increased.

Mercury swept the room with his gaze, seeing dozens of faces trained on him. They were in different shapes, some humanoid, most decorated in lavish, bright colours. Some were followed by a parade of monsters and people, while others stood all on their own.

Many of the faces gazed a little to the side of him, at Alice. A couple looked at Tiranor, too. Perhaps asking why he had gotten guide duty? Yet most of them were staring at him, and all the ones that did looked... *hungry*.

Taking a deep breath, Mercury centered himself. The air smelled sickeningly sweet. He smelled metal, because there was an arena in a corner, and blood was busily being shed, accompanied by cheer. Those had quieted down a bit since he entered, though.

The sweet scent was that of rot and decay and flowers blooming all at once. Soon, he found the reason for it, as someone approached him. It was a tall lady, probably almost two and a half meters. Her skin was green, with patches of colour, like a recently blooming grassy field.

She smelled of rot and growth. Piercing white eyes from a gaunt, hollow face stared at Mercury, her long, thin arms looking branchlike and seemingly reaching for him. She wore a hat, though perhaps wearing wasn't the right word, since it was more a weaving of flowers that grew from her head.

Her dress was a darker shade of green than her skin interwoven leaves dancing despite the windless air.

Wordlessly, the lady gave Tiranor a long gaze.

"Right. Mercury, this is lady Whisperbloom, of the court of Blossom," he introduced her, giving a low bow at his waist.

Mercury stood, giving her a nod instead of a low bow, while Alice refused deference entirely. Silence hung in the air, as the lady regarded the mopaaw. <Intuition> hummed of danger, especially when she let out a longing sigh, her breath stinking of rot, leaving a mouth full of sharp teeth and a too long tongue decorated in flower blossoms.

"You have done your duty in bringing our guest well, Tiranor," she said. Her voice was a warm wind that seemed to enter Mercury's skull without passing through his ears. A moment later her eyes lifted from Mercury's current attendant and locked onto the mopaaw himself. "I did not expect such a curious specimen. Surely you would permit me to be its retainer?"

Tiranor opened his mouth to speak, but Mercury answered quicker than that. "I go by 'he', Whisperbloom."

Instantly, the hall erupted in whispers, even more faces trained onto the confrontation. The lady's face fell slightly, hunger replaced with a hint of rage. Mercury felt pressured, suffocating all of a sudden, the scent of carrion surrounding him. "You will address me with my title," the fae hissed.

Mercury felt a pressure on his mind. A red hot rod of steel stabbing into his skull. The thing in front of him, wearing a facsimile of a humanoid shape was powerful, and cruel. She was making this interaction painful on purpose... so Mercury fought back.

With a quick twist of his mind, and a clever application of <Unbroken>, he shattered the rod in half. For a moment, lady Whisperbloom flinched. Then, he lashed out right back. "I agree to use your title if you agree to use my pronouns, creature," he hissed. His own attack consisted of a simple <Witness>, though it felt rather pointless, like he was slamming his body into a massive steel wall, yet the fae was rattled.

Not because she was harmed, but because the exchange went slightly in Mercury's favour. She had hurt him, yes, but not left any damage, yet on the impregnable steel wall of her mind... there was a scratch.

The hunger in her eyes darkened, and the scent of carrion blew down on Mercury. For a moment, he distinctly thought about activating the storm in himself, but then held back, simply allowing <Unbroken> and <Itinerant> to cleave through the pressure.

For a few more moments, the thing in front of him held. She stared at him with barely disguised morbid curiosity. Like she wanted to rip his legs off and see what was inside. But, in the end, she drew back. "Acceptable," she said, the pressure gone and her sickeningly sweet voice aloof.

"Well then, lady Whisperbloom. Does this conclude your probing?" Mercury asked

Instantly, the whispers around them grew louder, almost suffocating.

Then, a loud clap split the air, and all noise died down instantly.

"Now, now," a voice rose from higher up. There was a banister around the ballroom, a second level for people to mingle. The person who spoke was another woman, Mercury guessed. Her voice was cool and chilly, fitting to the quality of air in the room he found himself in.

Her face was gaunt, too, but rather than being green, it was pale and see-through. Like she was a statue carved from ice. Her features were also far less human than the other one, with her face of living ice having eyes carved all over it. No mouth, no nose, only eyes. She also

had no eyes on her side, instead, a dozens or so arms seemed to appear from behind her, extending out to the side of her slim, long dress.

A cold breeze replaced the sickeningly sweet smell around Mercury. Two of the woman's hands were shattered from a loud clap and already regrowing. One after another the eyes locked onto him and lady Whisperbloom.

"This guest enjoys my Hospitality of the First Visit, lay Whisperbloom. Do not overstep," she said, and with every word the temperature dropped even more.

Mercury felt the wood underneath his feet shift and contract in the icy temperatures, and at the same time he noticed that the floor was alive. Flowers of frost began to bloom from the wood, and <Adaptable> turned Mercury's fur a little bit thicker.

Another moment passed, then lady Whisperbloom took a step back. The many icy eyes twisted in pleasure, and the cold receded.

"Now, Mercury. I am assuming you are claiming the right of Hospitality?" she asked.

"Yes, I do." A ripple went through the air and settled on his fur, and suddenly the air felt a little less oppressive.

The eyes shifted slightly, barely perceptible to Mercury, but he could not tell what the woman was thinking. "Accepted," he voice rang out again. "Then you shall receive a retainer. And be treated with forgiveness should you break customs. Anyone who offends my guest in my house will face the consequences."

Stillness filled the room, no one daring to approach Mercury. Strange, <Intuition> still warned him of the lady who had just seemingly discouraged anyone else from attacking him. The eyes twisted again, turning slanted. "Would you accept my hand in picking out a retainer?"

Mercury frowned. "What would your help entail?"

The woman leaned forward, over the banister, four of her many hands wrapping around it. Those she had lost to her loud clap had regrown by now. She regarded him with her dozens of eyes, though some at the edge were surveying the hall, and shifted again. "I would give you a smaller selection of people to pick from, who I believe would be qualified."

Lady Whisperbloom scoffed. "All from your court of Chill, then?"

Mercury was sure he felt some mirth from the ice-lady of many eyes. "Perhaps."

A new person spoke up, this one even less human than the others. It was a cloud of ash, with bits and bobs of gold slowly levitating, like planets around a sun. The creature shifted, assuming different shapes. That of a tree, then that of a featureless humanoid, then that of some kind of raven, before settling into formlessness again.

"Inacceptable," the voice rang out. It was barely a whisper, yet Mercury heard it clearly. Ancient and demanding, full of loss and willingness to make others lose. It lacked sadism, though, and seemed simply retaliatory.

“Dust demands your selection be more varied. I additionally volunteer as retainer.”

The lady of many eyes regarded the cloud of broken bits. The air seemed cold, frozen even, but then the silence was shattered.

“I volunteer as retainer,” another voice called out.

“I also volunteer.”

“Yes, I think I would quite enjoy being this one’s retainer~”

Dozens of voices suddenly spoke up, asking for Mercury’s attention. His mouth slowly fell into a scowl. His mind raced as he thought of how to best make use of this situation, but his time for thinking was cut short.

Another shattering clap shut off any chatter in the ballroom. Mercury looked at the icen lady, four of her hands shattered all at once this time. “Silence. Fine, then. Guest,” she said, looking at Mercury. “You have seen how quickly the courts devolve into chaos. You find yourself in this one’s house. You may call me Witness. The courts seem eager to make your acquaintance. Please, pick a retainer, and pick *well*.”

Once more Mercury found himself facing a thinly veiled threat. Everyone in the ballroom seemed to be holding their breath, waiting for his decision.

His mind raced.

There were fae courts, because of course there were. There were definitely the four seasons. Spring, thought was called Blossom, as well as Winter, though it was called Chill. Yet, the cloud of Dust didn’t seem to fit into that schematic, so there were more courts.

Clearly, picking a retainer was complicated. It could mean his allegiance for the future, and he did not want to mess this up with a poor choice. He needed to pick someone reliable, or someone without any proper allegiance. A small idea sparked in his mind.

“May I choose anyone in this room?” he asked, carefully.

Witness regarded him coolly. Her voice rang out again. “Any who wish to not be the guest’s retainer shall leave this ballroom.”

Not a single soul moved.

Mercury found himself with a small smile on his face. He felt it, after all. Everything in this room was alive. He had friends here, even if the fae didn’t know it. A single tiny flower had broken through the frost covering the floor, and began growing next to him. A long, almost welcoming stalk of grass.

He sunk deeper into ihn’ar, breaking through both veils, and the world swam with colours instantly. It felt like an illusion, all around him, and all these fae were revealed to only be wearing shells, though ones that were close to their true selves... mostly.

One, however was entirely true to themselves. It was also humongous, and surrounded them all. Silently, Mercury reached out with a request. A name.

‘Arbre.’

The smile turned into a grin. He could tell that Arbre was, at least somewhat, positively dispositioned towards him.

“I would like to take Arbre as my retainer,” he called out confidently.

Every soul in the room froze. For a moment, no one moved. The moment dragged on eternally, then Mercury felt <Intuition> ring out a hundred thousand warnings. Suddenly the air was freezing and burning and suffocating. It felt like his blood was boiling in his veins, yet freezing at the same time.

He couldn’t breathe in the slightest, but he was already in ihn’ar, so slipping into <Rainfall> came almost effortlessly, and suddenly, he dispelled the suffocation. At his skin, everything stopped. He felt... just fine.

“A retainer has been selected,” Witness’ voice rang through the air. It sounded like a hundred breaking icicles, and if she could, Mercury would wager she would be throwing him a truly cruel smile.

There were dozens of gazes on him. Hundreds. Each of them was supremely hungry, threatening to test and devour him, the monsters barely holding back because of Hospitality.

Only two of the gazes were friendly. That of Alice... and that of Arbre, the tree he found himself in, itself. <Grass> was his ally after all, and while the tree wasn’t exactly grass... well, it was close enough, really.

The gazes on him were broken, when the floor itself shook slightly. A figure rose from it, entirely carved from polished, dark wood. The figure was featureless, a human puppet, more like a faceless mannequin, yet it still wore a fancy hat with a large feather like from a pirate movie. In general, its attire seemed ready for seafaring.

“Ahhhh,” the voice that it exuded was deep and inexhaustible and ancient. “So many people in charge of this house over the acts, yet none call upon me. Now you do? It has been so long since I have assumed this form...”

“Indeed. I do hope you don’t quite mind me interrupting your slumber?” Mercury asked, keeping his voice even and polite.

“Speak freely with me, Mercury,” they said, then chuckled. The laugh was hoarse and hollow, but nevertheless quite filled with mirth. “I am your retainer, after all. There shall be no offense taken by me today... from you, that is.”

With those words, Arbre swept the hall with a long gaze, and dozens of monstrously sadistic creatures withered under their gaze. They smiled, carving a facsimile of a mouth onto their empty face for a moment before it vanished again. “I see I am still respected. That much is good.”

Witness stood up on the banisters, gazing down at them. "You call upon my house as your retainer, Mercury. Clever, I admire this trick. How did you know its name?"

If Arber was bothered by being called "it", they didn't show it. Instead, they simply turned that empty face at Mercury, as if to inform him that there was no need to fret. Whatever he said would not be out of line.

"I simply looked closely, lady Witness," Mercury said, without a hint of deference. "If you open yourself up to the world, it is easy to find friends."

For a moment, it seemed as if Witness wished to speak, but then Arber laughed. "Ararara! Quite well said. Perhaps we are kindred spirits, then, Mercury. I would not mind that."

"It remains to be seen, I suppose."

"Indeed."

With those words, silence hung heavily in the hall for a little while. No one seemed to dare move, until, once again a mouth appeared on Arber's face, twisted into a frown. They released their hands from being clasped behind their back, and waved them around. "Back to normal, everyone! At ease," they commanded.

Sluggishly, like a giant machine slowly being turned on, the fae all around returned to their normal biddings. Tiranor had long since vanished from Mercury's side, and the mopaaw was now flanked by Alice to his right and Arber to his left.

Confidently, the avatar of the giant tree took a step forward. The fae around were often much taller, many of them larger than two meters, yet the crowd parted wherever they stepped. Arber looked back at Mercury with that blank, expressionless face. Their voice rang out again, as deep and unfathomable as ever. "Come on, then! As a retainer I might as well show you around, no?"

The constructed body of polished wood stepped forward some more, each step carving a tiny highway into the floor for Mercury to walk on. People threw him dozens of glances, some hungry, some impressed, many envious.

Arber, though, continued speaking. Their voice, however, didn't ring out through the entire hall anymore, instead it was as though they simply talked quietly to Mercury and Alice. Strangely, though, that should have been heard by the nearby fae, and yet never was.

"Over there is the bar, dear Mercury. It is where you go for food and drink. Trust nothing anyone else has touched. In fact, trust nothing at the bar, actually. Many of these things have been made by the fae, many of them spiked with powerful psychedelics. Ah, but your fragment of gluttony may help you break those down."

"That over there is the arena. These warriors are sent to fight against beasts or each other. Many of them are puppets of the fae, those who made poor deals. They especially like preying on the cruel, so many of the fighters you will see are twisted, horrible creatures. But some are also unspeakably kind, because blood is blood and death is death."

"Occasionally, they'll kill creatures, too, you see. Those are especially dangerous, because, well, let's just say that the lands outside of my own halls are... thoroughly uninhabitable." They allowed themselves a wry chuckle as they slid along the floor, half merged with it. The feather on their pirate hat, however, bobbed along believably.

"It is possible to actually participate in the fights yourself, though it may win you little favour. Ah, but I have been showing you around. I should give you a few ground rules."

"Don't thank anyone. Don't give anyone your apologies. You may appreciate things, you may mean no offense, but avoid phrases that provide openings. Fae are cruel and insidious. Always watch your words."

"Never insult someone directly. Let your gaze linger where it is wished for. People here carve their bodies as artworks, and you will know where your gaze belongs and where it does not. You are among the fair folk, and you will view them as fair or risk ugly things befalling you."

"Do not make deals. You may have interacted with devils; they are tame. Devils make deals for the sake of deals, fae however make deals only for the sake of their own gain."

Mercury interrupted for a moment, still following along on their strange highway. "How about you?"

Arber chuckled, hands clasped behind their back. "Arara, no, no. I have gained enough from deals. I am unmoving, stable. The fair folk have their deals with me, and they are simple ones. I allow them shelter, they respect my rules and my tribute. Simple as."

"And what does it mean to be my retainer?" Mercury asked.

"That, yes. See, fae love rules, but are truly horrible at controlling themselves. Up until now, a dozen have tried to contact you, and three would have used this contact to attempt to dominate your mind. I doubt they would have succeeded, though - your mind is quite spectacular for your age."

The news made Mercury grimace, which Arber noted and flashed a short smile on their facsimile face.

"Ah but worry not, scallywag. I am your retainer. It is my duty to intercept this, and only allow conversation when it is made in good spirit. In fact, due to First Hospitality, I have the right to deal out a punishment to those who attempt to touch upon you with anything but words. Trust that those who wished to harm you have received sufficient... let's say *compensation*."

After their words a chuckle rang out with that same ancient voice, though it was hollow and sinister and devoid of mirth this time. There was no amusement, simply a valiant sweep of the room.

"Now, for the last part of the tour of this ballroom... the second floor is for those who wish to watch, and are above simple politics. Currently, this encompasses very few fae... we love to mingle, you see. Even lady Witness - the current patron of this house of mine - has stepped down by now, as you may see. In fact, we may speak with her soon..."

Once more, Arber moved, taking a hand from behind their back. Instantly, its shape deformed, and a moment later, they held an entirely wooden spyglass. It had no lenses at all, in fact, instead of lenses there was opaque wood at each end.

Still, Arber lifted it to their face, and acted as though gazing through it. "Let me see, really. Aha! There, there! Land ahoy!" Then they turned to Mercury. "Uhm... that means there is someone who might actually be permitted to speak to you. Use your mind, and you will do just fine. Lessons are over, landrat, now prove your might on the seas! ... Of politics."

And sure enough a cloud of ash was approaching Mercury, feelers of thin filament tasting the air as the main body shifted through different forms, as if trying to find a suitable one. Soon enough, Mercury found himself face to face with a panther, made of shifting ash.

Flakes of it constantly fell to the ground, then rejoined the center mass. Additionally, feelers of ash still orbited the creature, carrying bits of golden jewellery or beautifully mesmerising constructs made of more burnt particulate.

"Greetings, Mercury. I am Celash from the court of Dust. Would you be amicable to some conversation?"