

Chapter 214: The Beginnings of the Fae Accords

It always came down to names with the fae. Remembering them, changing them, their meanings, owning them... all of that. Calling a ruler simply by the name of their court was, in a way, the same as removing their identity.

Of course, not all decay in the courts could simply be explained by who knew their name and who didn't. That would have been far too easy. It was a lot more complicated than that, in fact.

Mellow was struggling despite Oberon's power. Shadow was doing reasonably well, despite their ruler forgetting their name. The courts were connected intricately, in a web of truths and lies, promises and perception that influenced them all.

Because, at the end of the day, the fae were creatures that depended on others' view of them to function. Mercury had been able to believe Yearning itself into changing. The same could be done for any of the courts, though it was a lot harder when more fae knew about them. If there was a strong preconceived notion, breaking out of it was hard.

And because of those notions, some rulers were losing their identities. In a way, it was tragic. Losing one's agency until their entire person and world started to unravel.

Of course, some things deserved to unravel. Mercury knew he would have some conditions around trying to help the fae. After all, not only was it the fae themselves that had perceptions of one another, the way mortals viewed them mattered, too. If the fae played fewer tricks and didn't participate in bloodsports and abductions, maybe they'd be viewed a little more favourably.

Things to consider for the future. For now, Mercury refocused on the ruler of Shadow.

It was their court that stood the closest to the void. They were called guardians against it, even. Guardians of the Void. And yet, their ruler had forgotten their name, eroded away into nothingness by the ages.

"We will help you find it," Mercury readily agreed. "Though there is a condition."

The rulers raised the pressure pressing down on him at the insolence, but lifting a few mountains with his spirit was nothing new. He simply bore with it and smiled.

Shadow, for their part, did not put any of such weight on Mercury's back. Instead, they spoke calmly. "Name your desire."

"Simply put, reduce your cruelty," he stated calmly. There was confusion in the room. What actions had they taken that could be considered cruel? "No more abducting and hunting people for sport. No more killing mortals for fun. If you want to play harmful games, play them with other fae."

Blood reared up at this, three heads alight with furious indignation. "What audacity! Doest thee truly believe thyself worthy to make such demands? Kneel and apologize!"

"No," Mercury said simply, staring them down.

"This beast-" Blood started, but Mercury was sick of their shit. He activated <Witnessed> on them, stunning them into silence for a single moment. That Skill pressed down with the whole weight of his inner world. He had absorbed a chunk of Yearning on his first try, and then even more on his second.

Additionally, he carried a chunk of Joy, too. His inner world had grown heavy and wide, and crashed into Blood. Yearning and Joy and <Rainfall> slammed into its domain of carnage and silenced it briefly.

"None of that," Mercury said, a hint of anger flooding his voice. "You shut it now. Listen to yourself. Talking like you need it to live. Have you ever considered willing donations of blood? You need it to live, that's *fine*. But the way you gain it is wasteful, disgusting, and needlessly cruel."

"We simply gather what we deserve!" Blood protested.

"You deserve *nothing*," Mercury hissed. "What the fuck is your court about, huh? Is it carnage? Murder? Hunting? Who decided that? It's Blood. Simply pick associations that aren't as shit for others. Pick to be the heart that pumps blood. Choose to be the lifeblood of the fae realm. Not this parasitic, worthless existence you've chosen for yourself." He spat with disgust.

Of course, his words caused another uproar, and presences clashed. Shadow crashed into Rust as they tried to come crashing down on Mercury. Skye and Salt wrapped around Scorch, smothering their flames that threatened to turn the whole room to ash. Chill and Blossom held back Mellow and Illusion.

It was, in a lot of ways, a bloodbath, but the words had needed to be said. Now, there were no more words though, simply the roaring of presences, the vying for supremacy.

Mercury sighed. They were deciding with violence again. No thinking, just complacency. They were already perfect, and who was he to question them? He was so insignificant, after all! They could crush him like an ant!

Well, they *couldn't*.

There was nothing Mercury was better at than surviving and making his own way through the world. The rulers would need to learn that. He had allies, too.

Uldyrel released its presence for once. The fleeting, tiny ruler of Appreciation let its voice be heard, too. With a feeble, insignificant touch, they pushed against Blood, trying to get the ruler to just see the value of Mercury's words. The power they had over themselves.

He wasn't trying to take away all their rights; he was guiding them to see what all they could be, so that they were the court of Blood, not that of pointless killing.

Of course, that touch was, by itself, inconsequential. Any of the current rulers could have crushed their tiny voice. Broken and shattered it to pieces with their ancient, bloated forms.

None dared.

Despite all the posing the rulers did. Despite the arguing and literal fighting happening right now, there was an unspoken accord. No ruler dismissed another, no ruler killed another. Wars were fine, but crushing overwhelming force against a new player was a disgrace, and so, they all withdrew.

Even Blood. The ruler, so stuck in its ways, listened for a moment. To what Uldyrel had to say. To the way they Appreciated what Mercury could do, and what he could do for the fae realm.

Titania spoke into the silence first. "I believe," she said slowly, "that Mercury may manifest a better future for us. We have been locked in a stalemate for significant times. Seeing it broken seems rather sensible. This lets us choose the direction we move in."

Still, the ruler of Blood protested. "We are not choosing. He is."

The faerie queen regarded the other ruler with a look of cold reproach. "No. He is letting us choose within measure. We are limited by our domains already, what is another boundary?"

Illusion huffed. "To be fae is to be free," they spoke with that fractured, faint voice.

"What is freedom?" Salt spoke. "Every choice you make means another you did not make. Such is existence. Freedom is *always* within limits. Dwellers of the deep cannot live on the surface, for it would kill them. Yet, they're not trapped."

"Regale some else with your tales of pale failures. We are free," Illusion stated as though it was the simplest thing in the world.

Oberon's voice came down with a guillotine, scornful, quick and harsh. "You are fake. That is the greatest cage."

Another round of rage passed through the courts, but eventually was silenced. Mercury stepped further forward, pitting his <Rainfall> against the rulers. He was only able to carve out a small space for himself, but that was enough to get their attention, and the weights descended on him instead of one another again.

He breathed in deep, then spoke. "I see some of you agree, and others do not. Such is fine. But my demands," he paused, slowly looking at each of the rulers in turn. "They stand. I will not move that goalpost. Fall in line, or break first and leave me to clean up after you. I care little for that. If your throne shatters, I will pick the pieces back up and put them together in a shape that pleases me."

At that, there was a set of indignation around the room. Not a single one of the rulers present seemed happier with that outcome.

"I will not back off either," Blood ground out furiously, three voices of hatred thrumming in Mercury's ears. He heard his own blood rush through his veins faster at the proclamation.

"Fine then," the mopaaw said. "Do you remember your name?"

"Of course," they scoffed. "It is Tor-tern."

Mercury smiled. "Lovely. Face me in a bet."

Those words made the ruler ripple with disgust. "What makes you think you are worthy of a bet against me directly?"

"He has made a wager against me before, Tor-tern," Titania said.

Blood's ruler twisted. "No, he made a wager on himself, you simply placed a prize to claim, Titania. I will engage with him directly. That is disgusting."

Surprisingly, another court came to Mercury's help. Rust. "Are you afraid? Is your honor so important to you?" the creature of misshapen metal mocked. "I thought you were free. Not even free to fight your own battles it seems."

Tor-tern turned to face Rust. "Worthless. I will reduce you to rubble."

Despite the threats, Rust only sneered in response. "Me? When you cannot even accept a challenge from *him*?"

Blood turned to Mercury, alit with fury and indignation. The only options were to face the mopaaw, or garner spite from all other rulers. Something that was unaffordable, precisely because their existence depended on how others saw them. If they lost face to the rulers... Then it would irrevocably make them more of a coward, and that was unacceptable. "Fine then," Tor-tern of Blood spoke. "What are your conditions?"

"Simple," Mercury said, still smiling. "If you win, I leave your court alone. If I win, you follow three rules I lay down for you."

"That is a pitiful reward for victory. I want the same as you do, if I win, I wish to make three rules you must obey," they growled.

"Accepted," Mercury said. "As for the wager, I propose a simple contest. We each pick a champion close to us at this moment, and they fight."

Blood blinked. "A match... of bloodshed?"

"I am willing to meet you halfway there," Mercury said.

"Acceptable. My champion shall be one of the eldest among my court, currently still within this tree," Tor-tern said.

Mercury's smile widened. "I pick Zyl."

Titania raised an eyebrow. "Wasn't your condition someone 'close', Mercury?"

He turned to the faerie queen and nodded. "Of course. Zyl and I are quite close. Emotionally, Romantically, and so on."

Blood's faces fell. They had messed up. Too eager for bloodshed. Mercury smirked. If only someone could have warned them of this.

Gingerly, he reached out to the thread that connected him to his boyfriend back home, and pulled on it slightly, sending a faint thrum through the link. Not three seconds later, blazing fire enveloped the air around him, and Zyl stepped through, wearing his white gloves, and even his pristine suit.

"Oh, I see we're in esteemed company," he said, faintly amused. "You called, Mercury?"

"Indeed I did, my champion," the mopaaw replied. "You see, there is a match to be fought and someone close to me should fight in my stead."

Zyl smirked. "So it seems. And we are quite close indeed."

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Calling it a "fight" would be doing the fae a kindness. Zyl pummelled the blood beast for a while, until it was deemed sufficient.

In the end, he had cloaked himself in fire so hot that not even a single stain of red reached his suit, or his gloves. It was a domineering victory.

Blood had simply heard the idea of a fight and been entirely unable to restrain themselves. In fact, they did not even look too upset about losing. After all, blood had been shed. Didn't matter that it was their champion who lost.

"Fine then," they said. "Name your rules."

Sometimes, Mercury enjoyed the 'simplicity' of fae games. "You are not to harm others without their permission. You are not to put others in positions to be harmed without their permission. You are to bring people back to their original world upon request."

Was it airtight? Absolutely not. But right now, all he wanted to do was reign Blood in a little. Not necessarily crush them entirely, simply set a boundary that he wanted to make sure didn't get crossed.

Tor-tern once again seemed disgusted by the conditions, but their very nature didn't allow them to cross against that. Such was fae magic. The great freedom of setting whatever conditions one wanted with a wager, to take anything freely offered, also meant that they had to obey those rules the other way around.

And so, Blood agreed. "Fine, then."

That was the day the first of the fae accords began being writ upon the realm, with the making of Appreciation and the boundaries established for Blood.

Mercury was happy with just that, but there was more work to be done, of course. He had the accord with Mellow to fix their tree, a relatively simple way to help their realm be better. That was probably his next task in the realm. Then, he would help the lost rulers find their names.

Perhaps, he would work with the broken thrones again. Truth and Joy still needed a little more of a push, and he had not even met the last one of the thrones yet. But that could wait until the end of the meeting.

Despite all the offense some of the rulers showed, Mercury was happy with his choice of stopping the court of Blood. It was such a swift crushing of opposition, and now, Zyl stood behind him.

Having demonstrated his clear willingness to exploit the dynamics of the courts in order to smash down anyone who messed with the meeting, Mercury established himself as a genuine player at the table. With the backing of his lovely boyfriend, they didn't even have the firepower to say they could just crush him anymore.

Because they were bound by perception, they could not even work with one another in whispers, because making sneaky alliances would also impact their images of one another. Which, in the end, would make them more reliant and scared.

So, admitting they considered him a genuine force would only give him more power. What a strange stalemate that was.

But with it established, Titania was the first to break the silence. Her status was currently above Oberon's, because his court was slowly decaying, while hers was at its peak. Additionally, she had sided with Mercury more often, having some measure of his support too, which meant Appreciation was on her side, to a degree.

"Seeing the way events are unfolding, I believe it may be time to find our future. The fae have found themselves forging forward for a while, but now, we must cease our aimless wandering and seek sustainability," she spoke solemnly. "Eternity is long. We have rested on our laurels for so much of it. All in favour of a restructuring give their vote."

Titania raised her hand first, almost at the same time as Uldyrel. Finva of Dust, and the nameless ruler of Shadow soon joined in. So did Zanyr of Chill, and the courts of Skye, Rust and Salt.

Scorch and Illusion seemed to veer on the side of the stalemate for now, while Allure, Blood and Mellow were wholeheartedly against this change. Allure and Blood because, frankly, their domains needed the most restructuring, and Oberon simply because he could not stand any digs at his authority.

Seeing Rust change side fully was quite something, though. They appeared rather at odds with Salt, but also with Blood, so perhaps stopping that court a little had won their favour? Mercury found himself curious, but quickly decided the idea could be explored once he saw Rust's domain.

"Then the decision is made. Now, we must decide how much authority is to be given to the individual before us in this case," Titania decreed. "I believe none of us wish for Mercury to simply make whatever choices he pleases. And I believe we have seen that he will not simply bow to our whims, either. Let us work to find a suitable path."

"Actually," Shadow said. "We are fine with most work. My name must be returned at any price." It was a selfish choice, but Mercury understood. They, suddenly, were placed in a rather desperate position. Having one's name forgotten, after all, was the first step to becoming broken.

Oberon scoffed in disgust. "Your grovelling is noted. For those of us with some self-respect, yes, I believe that accords must be struck. So, then, Rainfall. What chains would you place on us?"

Before the mopaaw answered, Titania spoke up. Her eyes blazed angrily, and Mercury could see a vein on the side of her head as she addressed the masked king. "*Oberon*," she hissed. "Pull yourself together. Save your petty pride for when your continued existence is no longer at stake."

The king replied with the same measure of anger. "Do *not* dare tell me what to do."

Skye whispered with a light voice, like a gentle wind. "Haaah. Here they go again~"

And for a moment, it seemed like they would. Oberon stood up out of his chair, and so did Titania, eyes blazing yellow and purple with the smell of Ozone. The power in the air grew suffocating, to the point where Oberon's mask actually cracked.

Only a few seconds of staring later, the king raised his hand. The smell of dry leaves flooded the room. Titania responded in kind, and an overwhelming odor of pollen flooded in.

But their standoff lasted only a moment. The rulers of Chill and Scorch stepped in. Freezing cold and Blazing heat washed over Mercury equally, casting aside the twisted fury. Zyl, too, seemed raring to go, having taken half a step forward.

"Alright, everyone," Skye said, clapping all eight arms together, each accompanied by a horribly loud thunderclap. "Back into your seats. Think of what the guests will think if you fight in front of them."

Those words at least shook Oberon out of his stupor, and the king, still raging with anger, sat back down slowly. He gripped the armrests of his throne tightly, and the crack in the mask was still visible, but the blazing yellow of his eyes retreated back into the slits of his mask. He took a deep breath.

"Fine, then," he said. "Let the discussion continue. What are your conditions for helping us, Rainfall?" His voice was tight with pressure, but at the same time tired.

Mercury nodded, deciding to act as seriously as he could for a moment. "Right. I believe it may be best if I negotiate exact conditions with each court on our own, but generally, it will be a removal of unnecessary cruelty, and more choices for mortals in the fae realm.

Servitude as house staff should be limited and involve an option to return home at some point.”

Some groans, but no one seemed surprised yet.

“The arena battles should no longer be to the death. You have the magic available to heal fighters back up. Consider a sort of championship program, where fighters may partake in repeat matches, slowly growing their own powers,” he said, trying to phrase it as positively as possible.

Tor-tern actually seemed pleased with this suggestion. After all, restoring someone’s health meant more blood in the future. And Mercury was reasonably sure there were some people who’d *want* that kind of existence for themselves. So he emphasized choice.

“My main point is to give those who ‘serve’ you a greater measure of freedom. If they wish to work in ways that are less directly harmful, allow them to. Stop the fae from using their suffering for direct amusement, stop treating people as toys. Treat them as *people*.” He took a deep breath.

A dozen gazes laid on him, but Mercury didn’t flinch. “That’s the non-negotiable part.”

Heavy silence laid in the chamber. The rules certainly hit some courts more than others. In fact, Mercury would wager that they’d affect Blossom nearly the most. Theirs was a court of opulence, after all, and often opulence included suffering of others.

Despite that, Titania nodded. “I accept,” she said. “If that is what it takes to restore the realms of the broken thrones, then so be it.”

“Restore,” Oberon scoffed again. “But fine. This is a structure I can work with.”

“Indeed. We interact little with mortals, so it hardly bothers us,” Skye said. Salt nodded along, sharing the sentiment.

Soon, Finva of Dust and Zanyr of Chill also agreed, followed by the rulers of Rust and Shadow.

Eventually, Blood agreed, too. There were enough mortals that would agree to shed blood, after all, as long as corresponding benefits were offered. Scorch, too, relented when faced with this pressure.

Which left only Allure and Illusion, the two courts that interfaced the most with mortals, and brought many of them to the fae realm in general. “So what,” the ruler of Allure asked. “Am I to place down a contract in front of mortals before engaging them?”

“Illusions are based on fooling the other person, too!” that ruler protested in that tinkling voice from all around. “What should I do about that?”

“Allure first,” Mercury said. “I have some suggestions about, well, consent. Frankly, I doubt you’ll be short on humans who will willingly live in the fae realm. But yes, more clear

communication is certainly a start. I'll happily work with you on an individual suggestion when we work on rediscovering your name."

"Preposterous," the shapeshifting fae protested. "I remember my name. It's- It's..."

"Yeah," Mercury nodded solemnly. "I imagined."

Allure lost their lustre. That shifting form slowed down, stopped shifting, and simply settled into a blurry outline of something undefined. They leaned back in their chair. "Oh," they said. "I find myself lost. How did I not notice?"

"You will be okay. Uldyrel? Would you be willing to accompany them for a moment?" Mercury asked.

The little ruler of Appreciation paused for a moment, then nodded. Slowly, it flew through the charged room, though the air was sombre now. And eventually settled near Allure, where they spent a few seconds.

"Ah," came a mournful choke from the shapeshifter. "Fine. I accept. Do what you will."

Mercury gave a small nod of acknowledgement. That was eleven courts who agreed. He turned to Illusion. "As for you... have you heard of Escape rooms?"