

Chapter 187: A Glimpse of Quiet

What Mercury found out during his first day in the fae realm, was that fae liked to party. The gathering, which originally looked more like a ball, turned more and more towards poor behaviour.

The fae were trying to get themselves intoxicated, pushing their shells to the very limit they could sustain - it didn't matter after all. If the shell perished, they needed to create a new one. It'd take mana and time, but what kind of price was that to pay when you could receive a whole new body to abuse in exchange?

It also meant that it became incredibly hard not to find the atmosphere suffocating. There was vomit over the floor, and other sludge around. Servants hurried to clear it up, but they could not keep up.

This was yet another thing Mercury noticed. The amount of servants in the hall was rather large, and the treatment they received was... strange. Mostly, almost all the time, they were treated like air, as if they simply didn't exist. No one looked at them, no one acknowledged them.

People, genuine people often from flesh and blood, from species Mercury knew, other species he guessed existed, and again other species he had never seen before, were simply ignored. And it was almost hard for Mercury to acknowledge them - sometimes his gaze seemed to almost slip off.

Naturally, this created a conflict with his Skills, specifically <Unrestrained>, <Itinerant>, and <Unbroken>. It was trying to "break" his line of sight, which would interrupt the "path" his vision would take, thereby "restraining" his perception of the world.

With his skills, it was possible to look at the servants, yet none of them looked back at him. Sometimes, ever so rarely, one would make a mistake, bump into a fae, and be admonished. One seemed to get rather close to death, too, needing to apologize many times over.

In short, there was no respect for these people, and so they tried to be invisible, and largely succeeded. They interacted with the environment, held up plates of food and drink, then vanished into the shambling crowd of monsters.

That was also what he noticed: That the fae were monsters. Their civilization, the talking, the laughing, the playfulness, it was a thin veneer. Of course, he could not judge any of them, but these beings were ancient.

Many had seen dozens of empires rise and fall. Connections had become meaningless. Reputation mattered, sure, but as long as you didn't lie, your reputation was secure. The remarkable majority of fae placed no value on others, they simply lived for the enjoyment of the moment and the excitement of their future.

Mercury didn't have a problem with hedonism per se, but the absolute disregard the fae showed for any and all forms of life, and the amusement they got from others' suffering was... disconcerting. It made his own standing very clear, and reinforced it a dozen times over.

He was a plaything. A new shiny toy.

That feeling was one Mercury disliked.

Of course, not every fae was like that. Some younger ones enjoyed watching life, enjoyed seeing impermanence. Some older fae - only the exceptionally old, surprisingly - also seemed to derive value from small things. It seemed that among the immortal, those who wanted to live and saw joy in it lived the longest.

Arber led him around another bit of projectile vomit, bringing him to yet another representative of the courts. Scorch, this time, or summer.

If he was honest, the conversations began to blur at some point. He had talked to minor courts, major ones, gotten himself out of dangerous situations and played the fae against one another. He was maneuvering well, but he was growing weary.

Summer was *intense*. A flaming ring of arms, each with fire licking along it like the sleeves of a frilled dress. It spoke in rapid, hushed whispers, each one brushing against his authority. It felt like a bushfire, trying to consume him.

But Mercury was relentless. Despite his exhaustion by this point, he returned every push with <Rainfall> of his own, occasionally prompting hissing steam from the circle of arms. Each time it retreated, then pushed again.

The emissary of the court of Scorch eventually backed off, but Mercury had to be very clear about his intentions to not become their servant. They had gotten very close to the line between asking and demanding, probably on purpose. He accepted his situation with a sigh.

Eventually, after an evening that seemed eternal, Arber clapped their hands. It was a sound that rang out in the entire hall. "Nighttime has come," they announced.

Chatter ebbed. Faces turned. Silence held the room for a few moments.

"Face the grasp of the void at your own peril."

Then, the path along the floor Mercury had been walking on extended. The tiny, elevated slice Arber created led to a doorway on the side of the room. Without any further comment, the retainer tree puppeteered the pirate-mannequin over, Mercury and Alice following behind.

All the way until they opened the door, silence hung in the air. Hushed voices spoke again when they were through, but a moment later, the heavy wood slammed shut, and the hushed tones were drowned out.

Mercury was finally “alone”. Two people were still with him, but given where he currently was, Arber and Alice were about the best company he could ask for.

The young woman actually moved first. She let out a long sigh, leaning against the closed doors, her shoulders slumping. “Haaaaaah, that was tiring. I forget how the courts can be.”

“Seein’ myself being vomited on certainly is a different experience than just sensing it,” Arber added in a voice of contained anger. That did definitely seem disrespectful.

“It was certainly something,” Mercury nodded along, feeling weary. “I, uh, gotta deal with that for another nine days?”

Arber shook their head gently. “No, not usually. Some of the other days will be spent on hunts and contests, though, so you may have to expect to be challenged.”

“Can I decline those challenges?”

“Not without looking weak,” Alice said, having lifted herself off the door by now. She took a long glance at the corridor they were in, a twisting tunnel framed by smooth wood, interspersed with glowing lines. She took a couple steps down the hallway, and they followed as she talked.

“The challenges are a way to develop rivalries. Competition to drive each other to excel. It is more about reputation. About showing off your specialized Skillset. If you don’t wanna be drawn into the turf of others, it’s best to challenge them first, to a game on your terms.”

“I see. What kinda games are there?” Mercury asked.

Arber answered this time. “Many. Oftentimes, there are some games for many people to participate in, but one-on-one challenges simply have to be agreed upon. The host will cooperate to make any reasonable setup happen, anything extravagant must be brought by the challengers faeselves.”

That seemed mostly reasonable. “The challenge can be anything I get someone else to agree to?” he asked, just to make sure.

“Oh, yes,” Arber replied, turning a corner. “Half the challenge is getting other people onto your home turf. Most fae won’t agree to contests they’d lose, though, so it’s a balance of keeping your skill concealed, but interesting enough to accept, while at the same time making the other think you’re the one messing up. All without being obvious.”

“Hmmm,” Mercury hummed to himself. “Tricky.”

“Very,” Alice nodded. They passed through another set of doors, the once permanent murmurs of the ballroom fading away to near perfect silence. Their footsteps echoed down the hallways. “Especially when bets come into play.”

“Of course there are things on the line,” Mercury sighed.

Arber hummed their agreement. "Yes. Most of the time, the bets are small. A servant or two. A special product - food, tools, weapons. But for someone new? Perhaps we will see greater wagers."

A frown crept itself onto Alice's face. "My first challenge was someone asking for my eternal servitude."

"I had someone casually request I tear out my heart and give it to another tree to grow, once," Arber added.

"... Lovely," Mercury grumbled.

"Look at the bright side," Alice said. "Whatever they ask from you, they must put up an equally valuable wager."

"And how is that value measured?" Mercury asked. They were ascending a set of stairs now, the wood turning lighter as they went up, shifting from a deep brown into paler tones.

Alice shrugged. "Usually, they will simply bet something equivalent. Service for service, secret for secret, life for life. Sometimes, it will be weighed by the competitors, and the audience, too. If you are desperate to gain something as a win, then people will know."

"Hmmm," Mercury hummed. "Right. I'll see how it goes."

"You will," Arber said, quickly rushing ahead. "But you can do so tomorrow, for now, it's time I showed you your room."

"My room?"

They suddenly stop, laying their palm against a section of the wall. One of the magical lines inlaid in the wall suddenly turned vertical, then split with the groaning of wood. Inside, there was a chamber of smooth, pale lumber.

It had all the amenities any room would need. There was a bed, growing from the floor, root-like structures snaking up its legs. The mattress was made from soft, white fabric, and blankets and pillows were provided. Was Mercury planning on perhaps stealing that mattress for his logs? Considering it, definitely

But the room was much larger than just having a bed. There was also a desk. Then another door to the side, this one in a style he was more familiar with, having an actual handle. It led to another room, almost as large as the first. There was what Mercury could only recognize as a bathtub made from the same pale wood as everything else, and even a shower.

It was open, without any shower doors, simply taking up a large amount of slightly slanted floor space, leading the water to flow down the drain. There was a sink in this room, as well as in the other one with his bed.

With everything being the same colour it felt a little strange, the pale beige reminding Mercury a little of the white walls of a hospital room. There was one thing made from another colour. A silver bell, placed in the centre of the small nightstand.

"This is your room," Arber explained, showing him around. "The wood has been primed to your mana. It'll respond to your wishes. Shape it as you need, within reason. The bell will let you call servants. If you require food or assistance, call them. On request from the lady Witness, clothes will also be provided for you tomorrow."

"Clothes?" Mercury asked.

Arber nodded slowly. "Your jewellery suits you, landlover. But it's not exactly ball-attire. Shells are crafted to be beautiful. Being eye-candy is part of behaving respectfully."

The idea didn't quite sit right with him. "What about my stripes? Do those not count as eye-catching?"

"They do," the tree agreed. "But that does not make them suitable. This... is something it might be better for you to just play along with, Mercury. I will not force you to wear anything, but not doing so might be seen as an insult. Fae hold grudges."

With a grumble, Mercury hummed his agreement. It was fine. He'd make it work. How bad could it be?

"I'll be housing nearby if you don't mind, Mercury," Alice said, taking him from his thoughts.

"Yeah, sure, works for me," he agreed. Alice had been a quiet reinforcement up until now. She might've attracted some attention by his side, but at the end of the day, she was respected amongst the fae, as someone who was dangerous. With her and Arber, he had little to fear.

Thinking of him seemed to prompt the tree to speak again. "I'll never be real far away at all," they said. "You know what they say, part of the crew, part of the ship." Then, the avatar mannequin slowly sank into the ground.

Alice stepped back outside his room, laying her hand onto the wall across from him. It once again twisted, then slid open, revealing a room that was almost identical. With a wave from both of them, the door closed between them.

For the first time in hours, Mercury was enveloped by calm, blissful silence.

It was relieving. No chatter. No footsteps. No constant danger - actually, he should probably still be vigilant. Who knew what fae would just wander into his room.

At least the doors didn't seem like they'd open anytime soon.

Well, then again, that was also a bit disconcerting. There were no windows, and after closing, the doors had kinda vanished. But he didn't exactly feel in danger. He felt somewhat connected to the wood around him, really, which probably stemmed from what Arber said.

He attempted to reach out to the connection for a moment, and the wood listened. He could easily convince it to change shape. As an experiment, he created a chair in the middle of the room, and when he willed it, twisted strands of beige rose from the floor, knitting themselves into the right shape within a few minutes.

Then, he willed the chair to be undone, and it swiftly sank back into the floor. For another second, Mercury tried creating windows, though this failed. He could change the walls, but not reduce their thickness or create holes. That was fine, then.

By the time he was done experimenting, the silence had shifted, though. Nighttime must've fully fallen, but it seemed more oppressive in this place. When Mercury himself made noise, through walking or breathing, they seemed muffled.

Actually, even his senses felt muffled. Everywhere he touched the monochrome, beige furniture, it felt fuzzy. Like there was a layer of distance between him and the objects.

Despite the strange unease, Mercury took a breath. He calmed himself. Slowed down his heartbeat consciously, then hopped onto the bed. The mattress was divine, and he loved it. Maybe it would seriously need to pass into his log.

Even through his strangely dim senses, it was comfortable.

Slowly, as Mercury took the time to adjust, the world changed some more. But despite that, he didn't feel afraid. He could tell what was happening, and it seemed like... regular nightfall, strangely. There were no alarms ringing in his head, for now, though there was a current of danger if he ever thought about leaving his room.

Instead, he trusted his <Intuition> and just stayed put, paying attention to the realm all around him.

The air was still thick and smelled faintly sweet, like tree sap. Actually, he probably didn't smell quite right, either. With a quick twist of his telekinetic power, the tub was filling with water.

A moment later, his focus shifted to his environment again. He had many senses to probe it with, now, and he went through them one by one. The scent was faintly sweet, everything looked like light, magical wood, and it all sounded entirely silent, distant even. He couldn't taste anything in the air, and the world felt distant on his skin.

To his mana sense, though, this place was different. The lines in the wall around him brimmed with the stuff, almost overloaded, and the air itself seemed full of it, too. Yet there was something about it that didn't quite click.

If he reached out to the triz, they usually vibrated, moved, felt clear or murky. If he focused on the tiniest bits of mana around here, almost a third of them was... what he could only describe as tainted? The mana felt unclean. Unusable. Decayed.

That seemed about right - decayed. It was as though it had been left to rot. Stagnant, with no change. Without any movement, without in- or outflow, it was simply slowly growing stale.

Mercury focused more, trying to check the mana outside of his room. Anywhere within the hallway it seemed the same. Outside it was probably different; much worse, he'd wager. Arber, and other trees of their kind, seemed kind of like a sanctuary for the courts.

He didn't try to feel the Mana outside, since his room was probably somewhere in the middle of the tree. Anything else would have been dangerous, it seemed. What had Arber said? The "Void"? Hopefully it wasn't one of those threats that could get to you just by thinking about them.

After looking at the mana, Mercury decided to analyze the world using his *ihn'ar*. The pale wood still shone with Arber's aura, a calm glow speaking of wisdom and shelter with a hint of mischief. But he decided to check again.

So, with little effort these days, Mercury shattered the veil of gold and the veil of iridescence. The world was already distant, but now it truly seemed separate. He was himself, and the world was something other than him. Less important. Less real.

Almost instantly, he could grasp the seams. The gaps between reality and irreality. He felt that it would be so easy to pry them open, that it would take barely any effort. That the fabric of was and wasn't was so thin here that illusions could genuinely become real.

Then, he turned, and saw something in the gaps in the world.

It was just an impression, a brief flicker of contact, a tiny gaze. It resonated with <Nothingness>, in the same way that distance to the world resonated, in the same way those gaps resonated. In the horrible void out there, creatures of unreality existed and this one... it wanted *in*.

The glimpse Mercury caught was of shapes that weren't shapes at all, colours that he never could have imagined, even after seeing more than any human could. It was a creature that defied all logic, yet still had desire.

Relentless Desire.

If he had to call its actions anything at all, he would have called them ravenous. The thing that was the opposite of a thing clawed at those gaps. Tentacles and claws and ever appendage Mercury could imagine as well as a half dozen more tore at the seams, attempting to pry them open.

Looking at it felt honestly sad.

Mercury found it strange that the emotion welling up was sadness. The resonance told him a bit about the creature, and he knew it would not have considered him a friend. Perhaps if he understood <Nothingness> a little more. It was both the foundation of reality and its opposite and unmaker. How strange.

The creature though... was simply sad. Tragic, even. It clawed at those gaps with its vast, incredible power. Great enough that it could have torn Mercury to shreds within moments. Yet, it could not widen them. Mercury simply needed to shift his perspective and the gaps would seem wide enough to go through.

With a tiny twist of his mind he could have broken the fragile balance between the world and what would unmake it.

In that void, the horror stopped clawing and scratching. Instead, Mercury thought, it had noticed him. It was hungry. It wanted him. To tear him apart and assimilate him into something that was not at all.

Gently, slowly, he declined the offer. He would not like to be torn apart and remade into something that was not him.

Hatred.

Searing hatred and hunger smashed into him from across that connection, and the creature's clawing became incessant.

With a calm, gentle hand, Mercury drew forth the iridescent veil again, then the golden one, finally dropping out of ihn'ar.

A moment later, he collapsed onto the bed with a pounding headache.

[Your understanding of <Nothingness> has increased! <Nothingness (lowest) -> (low)>]

It had not been worth it.

His eyeballs ached. His stomach ached. For a few moments, he had gazed upon that thing and understood. Related to that hunger, that unquenchable, horrid desire for consumption. A phantom of that pain, a tiny fragment still laid in his stomach. A hunger that was simply incompatible with his physical body and his mind.

What a horrible, horrible feeling.

Mercury barely managed to stagger to the sink before he vomited his guts out. This day had been filled with disgusting influences. People who smelled like drugs. The constant stench of blood. Aura after aura pressing against him, filling his nose and lungs with ash and blood and pollen and cold.

It was miserable. He'd managed it all, but it was *miserable*.

This?

Incomparable. The hunger and absolute revulsion at existence was something he could not put into words. He retched again, throwing more bile into the sink, barely remembering to turn on the water and wash it away.

Then, he staggered back into bed, onto the mattress, laying down.

He breathed. In, then out. In, then out.

With considerable willpower, Mercury reminded himself who he was. Of <Rainfall>. It made breathing easier. The air felt clear. A gentle rain on his face.

In, and out.

Slowly, ever so slowly, the sensation of hatred and hunger was washed away. Instead, it was replaced with a dull hollow ache, and even that was soothed by the rain. Once he felt stable, he wobbled up, hopped into the bath, and cleaned himself off.

Maybe he was supposed to hate water, but this time, it was nice. The grime floated away from his fur in droves. The hot water let him think more clearly, and feel himself. The heat bypassed even the dull distance the grasp of the void imposed upon this realm at night.

Once again, Mercury took a deep breath.

Sometimes, he really shouldn't poke too deep. That had been... dangerous. Remarkably. But he had lived. But he could have also torn a part of reality to pieces. But he hadn't done that, at all.

He let out a long sigh, letting the worries melt away in the water. It was fine. He would simply move forward as needed.

But, quite frankly, he didn't feel like investigating this realm any more that evening. After the long shower, Mercury simply got out the Blanket of Dreams from logston, draped it over himself, enjoyed the comfortable warmth in a rather cold world, and drifted off to sleep.