

Chapter 213: Memory

Mercury had 900 Skill points. The fused evolution of <Unbroken> and <Unfatigued> would cost just that much. His other option was evolving <Dreamwalking> for 500. Mercury used that Skill a lot, but not quite as often as the others, did he?

His “Un-” Skills had always served him rather well. Yeah. The choice wasn’t that hard to him.

[Evolutionary Fusion confirmed. Engaging. Please pick an option to evolve the Skills into. The price will be the same (900 Skill points), no matter which you choose.]

[1. <Invigorate>

2. <Perseverance>

3. <Resolve>]

[<Invigorate>: The user’s spirit is unending and giving. Share your dogged tenacity with the world, share it with your own self. Break apart any commands placed on you, and redirect that energy into more positive purposes. Your willpower and stamina will be yours to command and your wells run deeper.]

Once again, an option to allow him to change the world around him. The Skill gave the distinct impression that he could use it on any target, be they living or not. What good, exactly, it would do, to infuse a wardrobe with his will was left in the air.

Still, the Skill had a lot of upsides. For once, he could free allies from mental manipulation to a degree, so long as he could bear it. Also, the ability to profit off of others trying to manipulate him was rather appealing. The Skill was powerful, especially carrying forward both of the effects of the Skills under it. Of course, he still had other options.

[<Perseverance>: This Skill embodies the essence of a tenacious spirit. Their decree is to persevere. This provides a severe boost to will, which increases in proportion to your core desire to remain unbroken. Additionally, it provides an inviolable harbour to your true self. You need not fear adversity, for it will tremble in your shadow.]

Huh. Mercury really liked this one, too. A boost to his will was essentially what he had gotten from the previous Skills, but the “harbour” part was new. And a little strange.

What did that mean, to have a harbour? That even if he did ever fail to resist mind control, there would be a bastion of himself left? He would be able to draw it out into a fight of attrition? That sounded strong; very, very strong. The other effect, too. It wasn’t just his willpower that would increase.

Mercury could tell with Appy and <Intuition>. That “will” part there was in direct reference to his resources. He would recover faster, the lower he went in mana or stamina. What a strange Skill, but one that seemed rather suitable for him.

[<Resolve>: Those who have proven to never break shall be given superior self-control. This Skill allows you to program routines for your mind which it will follow regardless of outside influence. Resolve yourself, and never falter.]

His final choice... was *terrifying*. Completely terrifying.

Once he resolved to turn something into a “routine”, as the Skill called it, he would only be able to cancel it if his resolve was stronger than when he made it. In exchange, it was nigh on impossible to cancel from the outside.

In a lot of ways, he could program himself like a computer, and then follow those functions forever. And while powerful, it didn’t seem quite right for him.

So, he thought more about the choice. And eventually, made one.

[The individual has acquired the Skill <Perseverance> through Skill Evolutionary Fusion!]

It wasn’t an easy choice, but that one was more like him. The core self protection seemed to align rather well with the idea of ihn’ar and finding himself. He could maybe even influence the boundaries of that “core” in the future.

Also, the idea of just not giving up as something he was still improving, rather than something he had and was ready to share felt more right. Because, yes, his will was formidable, but enough to spread himself thin? Not really.

Mercury wanted more. An assurance that he wasn’t going to fold. The knowledge that he was still growing even more in that direction. Especially with Skills whose names indicated rather high volumes of power.

So, he picked this one as a path forward. Was it selfish? Yes, but then again, he was a little bit of a selfish person. So, he picked the evolution, placing himself at a grand total of zero more Skill points. Mercury breathed in, smiling.

The Skill settled into place, and he felt it take root within himself. It was like a blanket wrapped around him, providing more stability. Like he had been walking on loose desert sand, threatening to collapse away beneath his feet, and finally stepped onto solid ground.

It was a change that gave his will better purchase to push forward, and he was glad to have it. Especially with what was coming up.

For a few seconds, he let that feeling last, then breathed out. Alright.

Time to face the courts.

Mercury turned to Arber, no longer staring into empty space, and the pirate-themed mannequin noted it instantly. “Everything settled?” they asked.

“Yeah,” Mercury nodded. “Everything I can take care of right now, at least.”

"We're not late yet, luckily," Arber said. That was only because Mercury was capable of thinking rather quickly with his split mind and <Oceanic Consciousness>. So, going through his notifications had not taken long at all. "Any more questions you have for me?"

"I do, actually. Who will I be able to bring along?"

Arber nodded faintly. "Me, as your retainer. Alice, as a witness to what you did. Uldyrel, as proof. That is all. The courts asked for Daryel but were refused. She assumed you wouldn't mind."

Mercury huffed with some amusement. "Yeah, that's fine." He understood, after all. She was reuniting with her wife. That took time.

"Glad to hear it. Do not let anyone walk all over you. Do not let them hold Uldyrel. Know your value, and hold steadfast. How well regenerated are you?" they asked.

With some soft uses of his new spell, <Shift>, Mercury had actually regained quite a bit of his resources. He felt almost healthy. Worn out and a little raw, kind of like one did soon after a workout, but not unfit. Still, he imagined his endurance wasn't great right now.

But... that's exactly what his new Skill was for, wasn't it? He smirked slightly. "Pretty good," he said. "Still digesting some of the world pieces I absorbed, so not feeling like I'm in top condition, but well enough."

"Let's hope it'll do, then," Arber said, a little doubt creeping into their voice. As they spoke, a small path of pale wood elevated slightly higher on the floor. "We're being called on, now. Let us walk?"

Mercury nodded, and stepped onto the path. It felt soft. A little like walking down a red carpet. Except it wasn't red or carpet. The idea of facing powerful people was the same though. Mercury faced it readily.

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When he pushed open the doors to the great hall he'd been called into, Alice and Arber were behind him, while Uldyrel hovered over his shoulder. The new ruler of Appreciation seemed curious, if a little wary of all its surroundings. Which was understandable, and just what Mercury expected.

He also almost stumbled when stepping into the room. All twelve rulers were seated, and the air virtually *crackled* with power. Their auras were all flooding out almost unrestrained, clashing at each other, competing for power and domain.

The flood of conflict crashed into him like waves, the power in the air making his fur stand on end, luckily hidden behind his cloak and puffy shawl. His legs shook faintly, but with all his Skills, he remained standing, drawing <Rainfall> tighter around himself to reduce the pressure he faced.

As was typical, the rulers were in a quiet standoff before he entered, but now that their target was there, a dozen heavy gazes laid themselves onto him. Some of them barely qualified for having eyes at all, but they could still very well take note of the new entry.

Mercury knew his allies in there were numbered. The rulers of the fae courts were everything but reliable. Which ones were even positively inclined towards him?

Dust most likely. They had worked well together, and he knew that the time-return item he'd received most likely came from them, so those were a good point. His relationship with Chill, too, was amicable.

Scorch was a wildcard, Mellow had a contract with him, but he didn't like the look Oberon was giving him, so that was up in the air. Titania of Blossom simply stared him down, her face a mask of aloof coldness.

Then there were Blood and Allure, looking like they were eager to see him broken apart, simply because that was their nature. Illusion remained neutral, simply enjoying the show. Skye and Salt seemed somewhat positively aligned towards him. Shadow and Rust were putting pressure on him, but it felt more like a test than anything of real malice.

All in all, he was in trouble. Then again, that was nothing new at all, was it? He had done the unthinkable. Abolished one of the faerie courts; a system of royalty thought to be entirely eternal. In fact, with the mending of Yearning into Appreciation, maybe they would no longer be the twelve courts at all, but instead thirteen.

He knew of Joy and Truth of the broken thrones, and then there was one court, also broken, he had not yet dealt with at all. Only time would tell what those were like.

Mercury breathed, summoning air as his lunging expanded against the crushing pressure. It was horribly heavy, but not unbearably. His spirit stood, unbroken. He had faced things similar to this often enough now. Especially since the rulers seemed to hold back somewhat.

Despite his recent feat, despite the fact that he had restructured an entire courts, those gazes on him were so distant, almost condescending. The rulers still thought him beneath them... and he was. Physically, all of them would crush him. Even in a mental battle, while he was confident in surviving, he didn't think he could crush any of them like he had done to Yearning.

That was the difference between a broken throne and an intact one, after all. These rulers were powerful, if not in their prime. Sure, some decay had taken root of their courts, but they still maintained a firm grip, some even maintained growth.

But so what? It didn't matter if they were powerful. Mercury would not die here. He felt his tether to Syl. He felt Alice stand behind him, her <Kindness> pushing some of the pressure aside. Distantly, he could even tell old Uunrahzil was watching over him.

Slowly, as the seconds ticked by quietly and the pressure on him mounted, as if daring him to remain standing, a small smile wormed itself onto Mercury's face.

It was clear what they wanted from him now. With all the rulers placed high up on the dais, on their thrones looking down on him. He was forced to tilt his head upwards at them, and their power mounted, the air crackling as more of it focused on him.

Calmly, Mercury met each of their gazes, even as the weight of mountains settled on his shoulders. He spoke, his voice steady and collected. "What have you summoned me here for?"

The question was loaded. Of course he knew why he was there. It was impudent and downright disrespectful. But so was their behaviour toward him, and he would not meet people with respect who actively chose to deny him that right.

King Oberon spoke to reply, his voice melodic and pleasant. "It is customary to bow in the presence of the rulers."

Mercury turned to face the king, took a moment to face his rancid stare. Then he nodded. "I'm aware," he said, simply, making no notion of bending his knees.

The yellow light blazing from the king's mask darkened faintly, the smell of rotting leaves intensifying a little, until Mercury pushed it aside with <Rainfall>. "I see," the king said. "So you come into our halls and disrespect us again? Twist our people to your designs?"

Tilting his head faintly, Mercury spoke. "Disrespect you? I don't think I've done such a thing yet. In fact, every time I have come here, it was you who called me. Isn't it disrespectful to my time? I've been rather graceful in accepting your summons all this time. Maybe I should reconsider that."

Now, Oberon burnt with fury. "You speak so freely near us, one would think you consider yourself equal. You're alive by the graces of the courts. Tempting us to snuff out your light is foolhardy."

"So it would seem I am a fool by your measure," Mercury said with a smile. "But you act as if you have power over me here. Did I not win a key to enter and leave the fae realm as I am wont to do? Did I not prove myself in your tests, over and over? Faerie king, if you keep this up I may think you have already been trying to snuff me out and simply *failing*"

Was it audacious? Yes. Mercury knew that much. He was not being polite. He was not making allies in the court of Mellow with this. But he couldn't stand that attitude. Like they were in power here. Like he couldn't just fucking *leave* and let their problems fester and leave them to rot, dying a slow and painful death.

Every instinct in his body refused to submit to such an obvious attempt at coercion from them. So he struck back in kind.

Of course, this meant that the weight on his shoulders grew even heavier. The faerie king Oberon gripped the armrests of his leafy throne quite tightly, and power blazed forth in a storm. Once more, a fake version of fall was summoned in this room.

It threatened to force Mercury to fall... but he didn't. His stats were higher now. His Skills had gained levels and evolved. He didn't even need to sink into ihn'ar. Against this much, he could remain standing.

"Impudent," Oberon hissed. "You will bow."

"I will not," Mercury repeated, still managing to keep his voice steady. The pressure was crushing, but with some twisting of <Rainfall>, he could keep it off of his chest long enough to speak as if wholly unburdened.

Finally, Titania ended the staring contest with a wave of her hand. "Permission to remain standing. Those for shall make note of it." She put the issue to a vote among the rulers.

Her own hand went up. So did that of Dust's ruler, Finva, though perhaps hand was the wrong expression. Chill's ruler summoned a new insectoid wing, this one without an eye carved onto it, raising it high above the remainder of their form.

The rulers of Shadow, Skye and Salt also expressed their approval. Allure scowled at this, their evershifting form remaining poised and still. Blood, too, seemed to broil with excitement at the thought of making Mercury kneel.

Six were in favour, six against. "Would the court of Appreciation cast their vote?" Titania asked into the silence.

Uldyrel blinked. Then it looked at Mercury. Then up at the courts. Slowly, it raised its hand.

"Seven against six," Titania said. Her purple eyes were locked onto Oberon's blazing yellow. "The rulers have decided. Mercury Rainfall Starlight is hereby exempt from bowing before the courts."

Instantly, some of the pressure disappeared. But that was not the only fallout. Even the stoic rulers began shifting and moving. Exchanging glances, strings of magic Mercury could faintly feel with his mana. They were conversing.

He saw dozens of thoughts flit back and forth, alliances being made and broken, opinions exchanged. Those who approved against those who did not. Most importantly, however, was that Titania had already accepted Appreciation as a true fae court. Uldyrel's decision had weight among the ruling council of the fae realm.

Mercury could not help but grin at that. With that simple question, Titania had made her stance on the issue abundantly clear. She wanted Mercury to remain happy. She *needed* him to cooperate with the courts.

Oberon burned with anger. Mercury could feel it, resonating through <Truth> and <Intuition>. The king hated being disrespected. He was every bit the haughty ruler he made himself out to be.

But that did not make him incompetent or any less scary. <Intuition> was already telling him that he was pushing his limits, but Mercury still felt everything he had done was necessary. If

he gave in so easily, the courts would think of him as a pawn. That was intolerable, he needed to be a piece less easily manipulated.

It would give him more leeway in negotiations, without having to bite them. Even if it caused some animosity. He hated picking sides but... not being aligned with Allure or Blood seemed quite tolerable.

The next person to speak was the ruler of Chill. "Now then," it said with a tinkling, crashing voice, like the crunching of snow under a boot and the shattering of ice at once. "We have called the individual before the courts to discuss its-"

"His," Mercury interrupted.

Chill paused, stared at him with those hundreds of eyes for a moment, then quickly fluttered some wings. "Yes. To discuss his involvement in the events that led to the abolishment of the fractured court of Yearning and the establishment of Appreciation. An event that reframes the past and shapes the future of the fae realm."

The ruler's words were in his favour. "What shall I call you, ruler of Chill?" he asked, out of curiosity and politeness. He would prefer to be polite to someone who seemed rather amicable to his plans, currently.

"Zanyr," they said. Then, anticipating his next question, they added, "any pronouns."

Nodding, Mercury acknowledged it. "Understood."

He was hoping to learn all the rulers' names one day, but for now a few were enough. Zanyr, for one, seemed happy to have been asked.

Blood spoke next, with all the force of a roiling ocean of thick death. Its voice was heavy and laden with desire, all three heads of the amalgam talking as one. "One of the courts was twisted and turned. Corrupted. The individual placed before us should be killed for the crime."

The words were simple, but laden with desire. Blood just wanted him dead. They didn't actually care if he had done the right or wrong thing, the fact that there was a chance of blood being spilled was enough for them. In fact, if he had just killed Yearning without changing it, they would have probably been all on his side.

More blood spilled that way, after all.

Finva of Dust's soft, grainy voice cut through the silence like TV static. "Execution goes too far. A throne was mended."

Rust groaned. "Our power sapped, our domain infringed. A world unravelled and changed. There is no path other than erasure of this individual."

The monstrosity of the depths that was the ruler of salt talked, too. "Silence, Rust."

“Command me once more and I will turn your bones to slag,” the robotic ruler said with a crunch.

Titania tapped the armrest of her chair. “Let us hear this one’s story first. Mercury, brought before the fae courts, you shall give an account that is held to the highest standards of truth. Do not besmirch these halls with a lie, or face our wrath.”

Her words weren’t antagonistic, instead sticking to simply being factual. Fae never lied, after all. “Do not worry,” Mercury assured her. “I am quite <Truthful>.”

Silently, the Skill spread. It slithered into the gaps of the rulers’ authority. Since the effect was beneficial and delivered with positive intent, it reached them instantly. Mercury felt a resonance with a natural ability there, one that allowed no deception.

Now, he had bound himself to honesty, so he spoke.

“When I saw Yearning, I found it to be disgusting. The stagnation and greed were antithetical to my own self. I saw trapped landscapes and trapped people, held against their will. It was distasteful,” he said.

Allure scoffed at this, a sound that was beautiful and mesmerizing. “It is the duty of the subjugated to obey the whims of their betters,” the creature of shifting attractiveness spoke.

“No,” Mercury said. “It may have been this way before in your realm, but look where it brought you. Fractured. Barely holding on. Thousands of years of decay and no solution. Doomed to die a slow, painful death.”

He turned at the ruler of Allure. Their figure shifted, forcing images into his eyes, but Mercury sank into ihn’ar. Gold and Iridescence broke, and reason and reality shattered alongside them. Suddenly, the many forms simply slithered out into the void.

Mercury did not see the true form of this fae, but each image that tried to take hold of his mind simply slipped aside into <Nothingness>, failing to take hold. It was a soft application of their aura, and this was his best way of blocking it.

“You, too. Your beauty is despicable to me,” Mercury said openly. “The very idea that you would attempt to seduce even those who have no interest in being seduced is disgusting.”

The words came out so neutrally and coolly that the silence hung in the air for a moment. Alice stared at him with wide open eyes. She’d expected some amount of defiance, but this...

Before Allure responded, Mercury spoke again. “The fae have a habit of speaking the truth; you cannot lie at all, and yet you always twist your words to fool others. Well, I refuse. Allure. Your throne will break the way it is now.”

“How do you know that,” the creature asked. Somehow, despite everything, its voice was more curious than upset. Uncaring and cold, now, rather than alluring, but not at all dangerous. They truly seemed intrigued by the prospect, almost playful.

Mercury nodded. "Because it is obvious. You have twisted the meaning of your court, slowly moving away from the parts of allure that are enjoyable. It is no longer there for the good of the world, but of yourself. This form of selfishness, of opulence, of greed, is what ruined Yearning, and what will ruin you. It is as simple as that."

"Tall words," Illusion added with some amusement, their voice a whisper from all around. "What is your proof?"

A tricky question. Mercury looked at Alice. She nodded, and stepped forward, moving from slightly behind to by his side. "Rulers of the courts, I am known as the hero, Alice. My <Kindness> is a manifold Skill I am sure you are aware of the effects of. It does, in part, allow me to perceive what is causing someone suffering."

"Putting down Yearning was a sad affair. I am glad that Mercury was there to change the outcome from a tragic decay into a rebirth. Because the ruler of Yearning was *suffering*. Every moment it lived, it was like a caged animal, lashing out at the hand that fed it. It wanted and took and took, trying to fill a hole that became more endless as more was poured into it."

"Some of you suffer similarly. Some more, some less. Allure suffers, because all the affection gathered is fake. Chanted up by magic rather than being earned. A facsimile that comes from the idea of duty, of needing to prove oneself, of sinking too far into ones aspect and court."

"In fact, I know that some of you hardly even remember your names, do you?" she asked, finishing her speech.

Silence. The question hung heavily. Allure seemed contemplative, some of that casual seduction stripped away as they were made to question. But they remained silent.

It stretched on for a while until a voice rose again. "Yes," it hissed. Dark and gruesome, sending shivers across Mercury's back. "I do not remember my own name," said the ruler of Shadow.

The quiet in the hall of rulers was even deeper now. Some of them seemed shocked, others thoughtful, again others plotting and sinister.

Shadow spoke again, though. "I would like to find it again."