

Chapter 269: Stronger

The night passed quietly. Starlight glittered on puddles of blood. The moon hung in the window, casting ghostly sheens of white. Mercury *looked* like a corpse, though his slowly regenerating organs quickly made that impression fade. If anything, he looked more like a zombie, or some other kind of undead.

Now, that was for most of the night. The far, far worse part came when he realized that Skills grew with desire and use. Right now, he wanted to heal, but it wasn't really a true priority. He already had a malleable, tough body, and he could supplement a lot of it with prostheses, but it wasn't perfect. He needed to want it more.

So, he turned off <Babbling Brook>.

A half-breath passed, and Mercury felt his entire body tense up. Every single muscle he still had cringed up inside him. He would have let out a rasping breath if he had lungs, and his eyes might have rolled back if he still had those. Instead, all that he did was twitch like a fish on land.

It hurt. It hurt so bad that it dominated his mind, flooded his entire being. It hurt so bad that he forgot who he was and the point of this exercise. All he wanted was for the pain to stop. All he wanted was to be whole again.

And despite that, he didn't push the pain aside. He didn't let it flow by him, and he even stopped using <Resolution>. Ethereal dreams could turn into his flesh if he wanted to, but this time, that was not what he needed. No, he wanted his body to heal itself.

To regrow. There was one tool he *did* let himself use, though, and that was one of his system granted spells. <Shift>. It let him change bits of himself, parts of his body. And right now, he was using it to drastically speed up his metabolism. To force his body into overdrive, making new cells sprout at prodigious rates.

By all means, it should have damaged his DNA. He didn't have that many stem cells - unless his Skills produced them - but to <Hydration> that was a trifling matter. It was a Skill based on complete and utter restoration of his body. It was meant to turn him whole again when he lost a head. To make him stronger from each near-death.

And it did. The Skill had grown to the absolute limits of what it could. Back in the day, it had taken him pages to regrow a leg, but that was no longer the case. He healed far faster than that, even without <Resolution>, but it was still agony.

Blood poured from him, even as his veins slowly seared shut. The blood was hot, boiling even, with fiery power embedded in it, but Zyl didn't mind at all. Still, it faintly hissed against the open air, sounding like ragged, dying breaths, which articulated Mercury's suffering since his lungs still hadn't regrown.

So, he laid there. Suffering and in agony, wishing with all his might, all his desperation that Hydration finally meet that damn threshold and evolve. To just put him back into one piece and let the pain end. That was his focus.

He even tried to *not* wish for the pain to end. But to be whole. To be restored. To let himself recover, somehow. If he focused on the agony, maybe he'd just get something like <Pain Resistance>, and he didn't really need that, even with how rare resistance Skills seemed to be.

But he waited. In his thoughts, he focused his mind, synchronizing all those bits of him, and desperately wished to heal. To be whole and hale and hearty. He wished and wished and wished...

Until it came true, finally.

When hydration finished recovering his lungs after a half dozen hours, and Mercury finally let out his first ragged gasp from a raw and torn through, he finally got the notification.

[<Hydration> has levelled up! < Hydration lv. 9 -> 10>]

[<Hydration has met the necessary qualifications for evolution. Evolve? (500 Skill Points)]

"Yes!" Mercury desperately confirmed. The low cost in terms of points was barely on his mind, though he did distantly note that it was rather low. Maybe his suffering had caused him to earn mastery faster, or whatever it was. A moment later, when the options for him to choose from showed up, he finally activated <Babbling Brook> again.

Instantly, the agony slid off him. He breathed a shaky, horrid breath, summoning air in his lungs to make them expand rather than using his ribs musculature - those bones still had yet to regrow. But he needed to focus if he was going to make the best choice.

[1. <Self Made Man>

2. <Bound Flesh>

3. <Assimilate>

4. <Overgrowth Manifestation>]

[<Self Made Man>: The individual's body becomes their sculpture. Your own flesh is like clay to you. Sculpt your own flesh, and bring to life who you were always meant to be. With a growing understanding of your own biology, it will become easier to remake yourself faster.]

He blinked. This would... let him change his body. Drastically. There was a hidden implication in there, of course. The very idea that he might be able to give himself a human body again.

And that made him face the thought of... what would he make himself look like? He didn't *feel* particularly human. Not with all the ways his mind worked these days. His life was so different these days compared to how it was on Earth. Hell, he could even already hold Zyl's hands, since <Force of the Hecatoncheires> was slowly growing to give more tactile feedback and even create warmth.

But.

Some part of him wanted to be human again. To walk on two legs, to smile at people properly, to not need to deal with fangs. He had gained a lot of tools to work around it. He could eat vegetables. He could emulate hands. He could speak. All of that was true, but the thought of a human form...

"Hey, Zyl?" he rasped.

"Yeah?"

"Why do you shapeshift into a human?"

The dragon shifted at the question, making a faint splashing noise in the puddle of still pooling blood. "Well," he started slowly. "Mostly because they're jacks of all trades. I could just as easily take a beastkin or elven form, I suppose. Why?"

"One of my options would give me a human for. I thought it'd be nice to... I dunno. Hold hands," he said, looking aside.

Zyl smiled faintly. "No need to pick something for me. I love you already. Shape doesn't matter. If you want to," he said. "We can match."

"You can transform into a mopaaw?" Mercury asked, surprised.

"Something close enough, at least," Zyl shrugged. "You just... seemed more at ease with me as a human."

Mercury blinked, then snickered. "Suppose that's true," he said. "I've gotten better at feeling at ease around nonhumans, though."

"I know you find my horns hot," Zyl noted.

"Absolutely," Mercury rasped with a smile. Then, he paused. Sighed gently, and gave the Skill another look. It was still strong. But there were other options, and he was determined to pick the best one.

[<Bound Flesh>: You resolve yourself from threads of dream. Now, weave yourself from silk, bind your flesh with magic. You become your own item, woven and malleable. Your flesh is a web, growing far more flexible and strong, and far easier to repair. Stitching your wounds shut will be your second nature, as you produce silk within yourself.]

His second option was about as strange as the first. To remake himself from *silk*. Magical silk, sure, and he could kind of picture it, given that the dreamweave was kinda similar to threads, but it was definitely strange. It certainly would be easier to repair, though, and far faster, too. He could see the benefits, though there were probably more of them than he saw right now.

[<Assimilate>: Due to your use of other materials to replace parts of yourself, you may make them a part of yourself, now. Assimilate nearly anything to temporarily incorporate it into your form, being able to use it like a fully organic part of yourself and imbuing it with the prerequisite material traits. Additionally, you may assimilate materials while healthy to influence the nature of your body, gaining and sorting their traits.]

Mercury drew in a hiss of air between his fangs. That was strong. *Especially* given his understanding of some materials - he could imagine something like [Metal]coming in very handy if he tried to absorb iron and make his skin as tough as steel.

In essence, it synergized and built upon things that he could almost do, enhancing them far further. To be able to use ice like his actual legs, *and* incorporate into himself when healthy?

Also... could he do grafts with this? Could he assimilate and shape biomass to do something similar to <Self Made Man>?

The Skill seemed more interesting to him. It was broader, less specialized than the previous ones, and seemed to function better as part of his current skillset.

[<Overgrowth Manifestation>: To grow is the fate of an organic. You create new cells, you restore what is broken, you absorb by second nature. Now, you shall never stop healing. Prerequisite biomass will be grown at all times, being stored within the Skill until the need to use it arises. Grow eternally, and manifest your flesh to replace missing parts or wield it when needed.]

Once more, Mercury blinked at his system. His regeneration Skills... why were they all so weird? Couldn't he have gotten a regular healing factor? A straightforward upgrade to <Hydration> that just said "heal better, adapt more" instead of all these... rather drastic changes to his biology?

He sighed softly, then read through them all again. They were interesting. One focused on sculpting, agency over himself and how he looked and felt and interacted with the world. Another about changing his basic composition to be more in line with a material he could already manipulate well. The third was based on reconstituting and supplementing himself, and the final one leaned about as far into the idea of remaining organic as possible.

But out of all of them, there was one he liked best. Mercury selected <Assimilate>, and instantly, the Skill clicked into place.

[The individual has acquired the Skill <Assimilate lv. 1> through Skill evolution!]

His body felt different. And there was a new sense to him, something that made him want to lick his lips. The whole world suddenly felt a little more... edible. Like he was staring at those videos where people made cakes that looked just like the real thing.

<Nutritional Preservation> already had a somewhat similar effect. It let him eat and digest things he really had no right digesting, after all. But this was even different from that. He didn't need to digest anything anymore. Everything was already perfectly designed to be a part of him.

"I think I'm gonna try something, Zyl," he said, giving a short warning.

"What would that be?" the dragon asked, tilting his head slightly.

In response, Mercury just lifted himself up using his will, hovering in the air a little. He quickly pulled open the window and glided out into the night, gesturing for Zyl to follow with a nod of his ruined face. He also cloaked himself in the concealing shapes of the Storm's Raiment, just to make sure he didn't terrify any bystanders.

Then, slowly, he and Zyl hovered outside the city.

Mercury didn't want to eat someone's house after all, least of all his own. So instead, he slowly levitated off into the forest. Then, he ate a tree.

Not exactly, though. The right word, of course, was that he <Assimilated> it. He drifted into it, and willed the wood to become part of him. The Skill worked in a weird way - on one hand, it simply worked in a sphere around him, but at the same time, he could stretch it out into "connected" materials, for some definition.

In effect, this meant that at first, he carved a spherical hole into the tree. Then, when it began to topple, the entire thing disappeared with a soft pop. Its roots, buried underground, were gone. All its branches assimilated in one fell swoop. All that remained was leaves, a whole swarm of them, slowly drifting to the ground.

Now, the wood had not disappeared. Instead, it was assimilated into Mercury. His skin was a little tougher, taking on some of the roughness of bark, but more clearly was his missing body parts. Legs, ribs, muscles and eyes... all of them were back, but carved from wood.

Smooth spheres of wood sat in his no-longer-empty eye sockets. He blinked wooden lids over them, and regarded Zyl. "Huh," he said out loud. Living wood formed his tongue, and lower jaw. Small branches still sprouted from him, greedily drinking in his stamina, even sprouting a leaf or two. "That's... new."

He stretched his assimilated legs, feeling the wood emulate his muscles and bones. There were microstructures in there, bizarre magical things that made them just as limber as his real body would have been. And, at the same time, they formed a *framework*.

Mercury could feel his flesh bubbling as the two interfaced. Usually, bodies were made to reject foreign material, but this wood was so perfectly integrated, it didn't count as foreign anymore at all. Which meant, as his body healed, it simply integrated it, moving any assimilated wood *into* the Skill.

At the same time, he could also shunt it away with another case of his Skill if he wanted to. Deposit it all back on the ground. The Skill apparently allowed for a good chunk of internal material storage, which he could willingly let interface with his body. He could store ice or stone for reinforcing and rebuilding himself, even without letting them affect him - or he could use metal to reinforce his skin further.

Even more than rebuild himself, though, he could shape these additional parts of himself. The wood was responsive, and as Mercury willed it, more of it poured from the storage into his body. His muscles bulged, additional wooden fibres supplementing his natural constitution.

"That's so strange," Zyl said, pushing a hand through Mercury's fur with his face full of wonder. "What a fun Skill. What else can you assimilate?"

Mercury took a deep breath, pausing his experimentation to explore that new sense of his. At the same time, he didn't fully trust it. The feeling of... *hunger*, if he could call it that, mostly targeted solids. Now, these solids could be almost anything. For example, the Skill did also highlight that he could <Assimilate> parts of Zyl if he wanted.

Which seemed incredibly unwise, but also funny. "You," Mercury provided immediately. "In fact," he licked his lips stepping forward, "you're looking rather tasty there, Zyl..."

The dragon hastily raised his hands, stepping backwards. "Nope! No! Bad Mercury! No eating me!" he said, grabbing a stick and lightly tapping his boyfriend with it. The apprehension was only halfway fake, until Mercury broke out into snickering. He gave a bright smile, finding himself truly happy.

All his pain was gone. He got to fool around with his boyfriend again. Such was peace.

But he still questioned his Skill's propensities. For example, it told him he could eat wood and grass and stones and earth... but why not air? After all, that should work just fine, surely. Why not light, too?

With a quick twist of his mentality, he felt <Perceived Ease> triggering again, and the world shifted. Mercury drank in the air and light around him, creating a perfectly black sphere for a moment. Zyl blinked, as if he was staring into a dark hole, except there was no accretion disk or gravity.

Anything within range got assimilated. When Mercury reappeared, he'd also grown wings. Crystals of air and ribbons of moonlight sprouted from his back. The dragon blinked again, scarcely believing his eyes. But there his boyfriend was, doing the impossible again.

Mercury smiled, then flapped the wings once. Then, a second and third time. He lifted.

What else could he assimilate? His own mana? Yes, apparently. The energy from his <Grain of Infinity>? Also yes. The dreamweave that constituted the mortal realm?

No to that one, actually. Well, more because he didn't want to try. Tearing holes in a world he'd just fixed seemed like an unwise decision. If he wanted to experiment in <Assimilating> some <Dreamweave>, he could very well use it on his own dreams. But the sheer variety of things the Skill let him assimilate was fascinating.

[The assistant intelligence requests to never be designated as a target of the <Assimilate> Skill by the dum-dum.]

Mercury smiled faintly at Appy's antics, then reassured her with a thought. 'Don't worry. Wouldn't dream of it,' he thought at her. Then, he returned to Zyl, yet another person he *could* but *wouldn't* make part of himself.

They probably had some resistance to the Skill, anyway. <Assimilating> things felt a little like pulling on them and chewing them at the same time. Air was easy, but hard to grasp and swallow. Energy was bizarrely sour and bitter all at the same time, and escaped through his teeth, but he got it anyway. The wood felt solid, tough and hard, but that wasn't an obstacle.

Zyl, though? He had his own will, his own desires and wishes. Taking some part of the dragon via <Assimilate> wouldn't be any easier than cutting him with <Carve>. In fact, cutting things before trying to eat them would probably be easier.

"Do you ever shed your scales, Zyl?" Mercury asked hesitantly.

At that, the dragon blinked one more time. He stood, awkwardly and a little shellshocked. "Uh," he stuttered. "Can you... give me a moment to digest the whole 'my boyfriend eats light and energy' thing?"

Mercury laughed for a while longer, and the two spent the evening playing around with the Skill.

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Yes, Zyl did sometimes shed his scales, and yes, Mercury could <Assimilate> them. That was how his skin gained the properties of dragonscale. He also tried some more to see what he could do... and the strangest use-case was mimicking the <Overgrowth Manifestation, actually.

Since the Skill had internal material storage, and Mercury could <Assimilate> almost everything and manifest it when needed... he figured, why not try on himself? And it worked.

He could store his own flesh and blood within the Skill, calling it forth when needed. And also use it to reshape and manipulate it, himself. Malleable bones and ligaments and skin and muscles turned into a functional human arm growing from his back in one bizarre experiment.

Of course, he promptly shook Zyl's hand. The dragon was both fascinated and slightly weirded out, which was a good summary for how Mercury felt as well! Wonderful.

At the end of the night, Mercury subsumed all the <Assimilated>, manifested bits and bobs back into himself. All he left was the prosthetics, putting himself back together into what he'd usually look like. Seeing the way the wood shifted to approximate his fur was a little strange, though.

The whole "impart suitable material properties" really was doing some heavy lifting for the Skill.

Regardless, he was still happy with it. He could walk back to their house on his own legs - and yes, they were his legs, even if they were prosthetics, in a way - and he made his way to the bedroom as well. All he had to do was lay down in bed, close his eyes and...

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[Main Quest: "Rends in Reality." Chain <2> completed!

Reward: <Realmshifting> affinity increase, <Worldhealer> title.

Note: Additional rewards may be granted by the entity requesting this task to be completed.

Additional rewards: Experience, 500 Skill Points, <Seeker Of Secrets> mastery, Unique Skill: <Scope Expansion>.

Additional Note: *Thank you. This world is more whole due to your deeds.*]

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[Level Up!]

[Level Up!]

[Level Up!]

[Level Up!]

[Level Up!]

Mercury looked at the notification, blinked, then sighed, very gently. He looked upon the screen, at the notification that the “quest-giver” had sent him. He was pretty sure he knew who it was, anyway. This realm.

Some kind of pseudo-intelligence, not dissimilar to his nexus or Appy. It made sure Chronagen operated well, that the world itself was stable, that the people did not need to face creatures of the void.

Maybe it even felt some kinship with Appy, given the mastery it sent to the Skill. In fact, Mercury was rather curious about that.

[<Seeker Of Secrets> has levelled up! <Seeker Of Secrets lv. 3 -> 4>]

It was just a single level, but given how Appy usually responded to those, he still smiled. As the number ticked over, he instantly felt the change, too. The way that his oldest companion on this world shifted and changed. She grew.

He watched her growth spurt with interest, the way that the space that the Skill occupied seemed to grow a bit, too. Through his growing perception, he could see it more clearly. The way that the system flooded into reinforce Appy, to grow her, and stretch her capabilities. That was why the Skill always displayed bursts of sassiness when it levelled.

Appy was exploring her new limits when it happened. Instead of developing synapses one by one, in tiny, miniscule steps, her development happened in bigger steps. Each level represented a fundamental increase in computational power. It was like all of puberty, condensed into a single moment.

[This assistant consciousness would like to remind the dum-dum that her computational power vastly exceeds the average humanoid, and that “puberty” is a vastly reductive descriptor.]

Mercury smiled at the notification. “Is it inaccurate, though, dearest Appy?” he asked in a whisper.

[... No.]

The admittal was begrudging, but true. There was even some tone in there. Where humans had to fight for math and logic, those came easy to her. But Appy had to fight for every inch of creativity, tone, self-expression. And now, she’d won another inch. That made him happy.

He took a moment to focus again. Which of his next rewards was he most curious about... ah, there was really only one answer.

[<Scope Expansion>: A unique Skill that exists to boost an individual’s capabilities. All your Skills reach further - they are not stronger, but their influence spreads.]

Right. The description was... vague. And short, he noted. But he supposed that was how unique Skills tended to be. They were unique, after all, so writing descriptions for them must be hard work.

A quick glance at his menus did tell him the Skill sat at level 1, as it should, which meant it had room to grow. It was also entirely passive. He could not shift the effect in intensity, or at least not with the Skill itself.

So, he reached for another Skill instead to test it out. The first thing he checked was <Truth>, his most trustworthy, foundational Skill. And instantly, he felt the difference.

<Scope Expansion> did exactly what it promised. It made <Truth> go a little further, it let him stretch the Skill’s definition. Where before, he could use it to resist mental effects, or let others know when he was telling the truth, as well as all the benefits it had had as <Unrestrained> and <Limitlessness>, it now stretched a bit further.

It let him manifest his <Truth> a little, for one. He could let it influence reality and his body more. He could also rely on things that were similar... say, if he threw a rock and his aim was *true*, then it’d be hard to miss. <Resolution>, a Skill meant for regenerating himself from nothing, let him change the resolution of his vision, drawing distant objects into focus, for example.

<Unravel> could now be used in an entirely mundane way, like taking apart clothing or other fabrics. <Babbling Brook> became capable of actually summoning a small stream of water.

It wasn't a massive change in any of these Skills, but it let him feel the boundaries of where a Skill *should* have ended, of what it *shouldn't* have been able to do... and stretch them. In fact, it felt a little like when he'd taken <Telekinesis> into <Force of the Hecatoncheires>, where he'd pushed the Skill past its limits... and almost broken himself.

Now, it wasn't so bad anymore. He could safely and comfortably stretch his Skills a bit more.

Curiously, this was the second Skill he got that let him change how his other Skills functioned. The other was <Grain of Infinity>, which let him pseudo-inverse Skill effects. Could the two interact?

The answer was yes. If he inverted <Scope Expansion>, it turned into <Specialization>. His Skills grew more narrow, yes, but at the same time, their power redoubled. Their central aspects were enhanced, and supplemental bits discarded. Again, the change wasn't massive, but it did represent an all-around increase in power, at the cost of flexibility.

He gave a small smile at the interaction. <Scope Expansion> was interesting. Not necessarily the strongest Skill, but it was *fun*. And that was the best part of it. It wasn't powerful, but it let him be more free, to experiment and understand his Skills better. It suited him. He liked it.

Then, the only reward left was his new title.

[<Worldhealer>: Where a realm was injured, you healed it. Your ability to increase reality levels and dimensional stability is increased. Worlds will be more positively inclined towards you. Your ability to perceive and interact with *reality* is increased.]

A fairly flat, but noticeable bonus. He could tell how things had changed - the way he felt the world to be a little different. Reality levels had been something he was slowly becoming more attuned to, and now, that sense sharpened. He could tell where the world was thinner and thicker, and compare them to other places he'd been.

And he could interact with it more easily. He reached out with a paw, and gently plucked at a string of reality. It let him touch it, directly, and let out a resonant hum as he plucked it.

No weaving, no interactions with his mind. He could stitch the world back together with a sewing needle and some mundane thread now, if he needed to. Which was an entirely bizarre thought. But he let it go, as well.

The next thing he focused on was the affinity increase. That one was harder to feel, but definitely there. A little bit more power for <Itinerant> and <Voidwalker>, as well as making their evolutions cheaper. He liked that.

Outside of all those rewards, the final thing he gained was points. 500 Skill points, and 5 levels, to be precise. Which meant he had one more thing to look at. "Status," he said.

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Status:

Mercury Rainfall Starlight

Level: 9 -> 14

Species: Lumyron

Titles: <Worldhealer>, <Guest>, <Worldweaver>, <Relentless Will>, <Successor>, <Star Usurper>, <Trialist>, <Patient Learner>, <Mountain Usurper>, <Tenacious Genius>, <Forest Usurper>, <Tutorial Completer>

Alias: Beast, Mittens, dum-dum, Yr'enzel, Biso

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Hp: 903/2950

Mp: 4054/4054

Sp: 1700/1704

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Strength: 146 - > 151 (+5)

Vitality: 280 -> 300

Dexterity: 167 -> 172 (+30)

Agility: 193 -> 197(+30)

Intelligence: 235 -> 255 (+40)

Wisdom: 255 -> 265 (+2)

Willpower: 505 -> 525

Luck: 349 -> 364

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Ability points: 200

World points: 15 000

Skill points: 2000

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Gold: 51 950

Beast familiars: 2/2

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[The individual's Vitality has surpassed 300! Your control over your shape increases.]

He looked at that last notification and snickered. Then, he poked Appy with his mind. 'Are we done for the day?'

[No more pending notifications,] she helpfully confirmed.

Mercury looked outside one last time, enjoying the starlight drifting in through the window. He could feel it resonate with him softly, a gentle hum of kinship. And he nodded to himself.

Now, he'd earned a few days of calm before the next piece of trouble appeared.

So why, when he woke up in the morning, did he do so with a sunburn?