

Chapter 212: Evading the Courts

Mercury breathed, the old realm of Yearning now gone and torn apart. The space they were in was slowly dissipating into a white void. Appreciation would take root here if everything went well, slowly spreading out to occupy the freed up space and hold it together again.

Had Mercury done a lot of damage? Yes. He had absorbed the vast majority of this world into his own. But at the same time, he had woven the new tapestry, and connected it to Uldyrel nicely, and the young fae ruler would, hopefully, do better than their previous incarnation.

Actually... no, they would do better. Mercury looked at the little creature, tree and antlers and glowing orbs. It floated just above his shoulder, curiously spinning, taking in all the people sobbing in their newfound freedom. Their first sight in this world was happiness.

They'd do just fine, Mercury was sure.

Patiently, he waited, giving Daryel and her wife the time they needed. The woman's name would be returned by now, too. Eventually, as the sobs died down a little, Mercury spoke softly. "Daryel, would you like to introduce us?"

Startled, the old woman turned around, face still red and eyes teary with joy. The look of surprise was quickly replaced with a faint smile. She swiped the large sleeve over her face again, staining the fine fabric with tears and snot.

"Of course," she said, her voice less stoic than before, trembling faintly. "Mercury, Alice, this is my lovely wife, Itsu. Itsu, these are Mercury and Alice, the two who helped me get here. Alice is a kind heart, and Mercury is..." she paused, tilting her head. "Well, I suppose he is someone who weaves, if I had to put a finger on it."

He smirked faintly, then gave a bow to Itsu. She looked younger than Daryel, but he was more than sure it was a magical effect. The woman was tall, with hair that almost reached the floor, and nine bushy tails, each a soft, brownish-red. Her fingernails were long and beautifully painted, and her kimono was elegant, with flowers embroidered on it.

She gave him a faint smile, flowing eyebrows quirked upwards. Her voice had a sing-song to it. "It is rather lovely to meet the people who were involved in my safety. I owe you a debt." She dipped her head faintly.

Alice smiled. "If you wish to repay it, I enjoy small gifts. Things that are made with love and did not take too much time."

Itsu returned the expression, though her smile was a little too large, her face seeming malleable. Still, there was no malice behind it, just a bit of awkwardness. "If the heroine would take it, I'll gladly make a wreath of some flowers."

Then, the kitsune turned to Mercury. "And you, kin?"

"Not a kin, actually," he corrected.

"Oh?" she asked.

Daryel lightly tapped her shoulder. "Don't be rude now, Itsu," she whispered, though with no real admonishment within the words.

The fox frowned faintly. "Was I being rude?"

Mercury shrugged. "Other people may mind. I do not. I used to be a human, then I died, now I'm in this body. I don't know what landed me in it. I don't care, either. I'm fine never finding out, frankly."

"Fair," the kitsune said. "I was also not always like this."

"Then we have something in common," Mercury supplied happily. "But before we continue introductions, we should probably get somewhere nicer. This place won't hold for long. And we should get all these people out, too."

"So it seems," Daryel said.

Alice hovered into the air slightly. Mercury could feel a faint warmth fall onto his skin from her, like he was standing in gentle sunlight. Her voice sounded as if she stood next to him, talking at a comfortable volume. "Excuse me, everyone? My name is Alice. Me and my friends over here," a flash of light rang out, indicating their position, "have been working hard to get you unfrozen. Which has been a resounding success! But this place is kinda falling apart, so if you could gather here, we'll do our best to get you somewhere safe!"

The message rang out over crumbling grasslands and a blank, white sky, and people did begin to filter towards them. Lovely.

"Can you also contact Arber?" Mercury asked.

Alice smirked. "They're your retainer, Mercury. You're the one with the special bond."

Oh? Oh. There was a connection there. A very faint one, that felt like a... bell you'd ring to ask for a butler? Slightly icky, but he also distinctly felt that Arber could easily ignore it. And they'd agreed to be his retainer, too, so that was fine. He tugged on it slightly, and felt a stirring on the other end.

A dozen more minutes passed by, and by the end, lots of people had gathered around them. Some were carried by others, too frail to walk after such long times spent frozen. Others had simply given up, not moving despite being given the chance. Others again were mistrusting- Which was fine. Mercury would figure it out.

For now, as the world crumbled, he simply manifested his inner world, and people eventually flocked over. Even the distrusting ones preferred this path to flinging themselves into the void. That place was cold and uncaring; compared to that? Mercury's <Truth> and Alice's <Kindness> were pretty clear indicators that they weren't terrible people.

When the archway of roots and branches eventually appeared, Mercury dipped into his remaining magical juice and empowered it slightly, holding it steady with <Itinerant> and his mind. He'd recovered a little in the last few minutes, though his body was still in tatters. No matter, he'd heal.

The gateway flickered slightly, then snapped into place. The torn up space of the realm itself made it easier for spatial magic to anchor, and Daryel, too, seemed to use some kind of gravity magic to make it conceptually "heavier".

Her and Itsu stepped through first, demonstrating that it was safe. Mercury remained on this side - just to keep up an island of non-void.

It felt strange, actually. Using <Dream Manifestation> in the empty void, or a fading realm. There was less pressure from the outside, nothing pushing it into him. Instead, he actively had to hold it together, as it constantly wanted to dissipate into the surrounding vacuum.

Apparently, neither state was particularly easy or comfortable to keep up permanently. Inconvenient, but manageable.

One by one, everyone trickled through to the other side. Some grumbled, most sobbed happily at the prospect of being *anywhere* else. Frankly, many of them had already sobbed in happiness simply from touching the soft grass of Mercury's domain, or when he used ice magic to make some water.

Eventually, everyone had gone through. Mostly of their own will. Then, Alice went through, too. Finally, it was just Mercury and Uldyrel. He looked at the little monarch. Gently, he spoke. "Can you understand me?"

They looked at him, then faintly bobbed up and down. Mercury smiled. "You're clever, too! Already figuring out what a nod is. Good job."

Once more, the fae bobbed excitedly.

"Okay, then listen. Things might get a little confusing over there. It'll be bright and uncomfortable. If you get scared, you can hide behind me, okay?"

A bob, up and down again.

"If anyone bothers you too much, sit on my back. If you're okay interacting, float over my shoulder. If you just need a break, lay down somewhere. Does that work?" he asked.

Uldyrel bobbed up and down.

Mercury smiled. "Okay then. Let me show you a whole world, kiddo."

He stepped through the portal.

The world warped, and Mercury let himself be carried by the current.

A moment later, he stood in familiar tunnels of pale wood. He withdrew his manifestation, only keeping a thin layer of <Rainfall> around him. Dozens of wooden mannequins were already accompanying many of the new arrivals, though the one with the pirate hat was rapidly approaching Mercury.

Despite that, before Arber got to him, more rifts in space opened. Pressure descended, and Mercury's previous smile instead became a thin line on his face. Instantly, the rulers stepped through. Blossom and Chill and Scorch and Mellow and Dust and-

Voices descended, and the quiet murmurs of confusion in the tunnels became great demands of knowledge.

So, Mercury decided to be a little mischievous. He let his protections fade slightly, only the physical aspect, keeping his mind perfectly intact. But his already suffering physical shell, well...

Not a dozen seconds later, he was leaking blood from his eyes and mouth and ears and the world was spinning and Mercury fell to the floor, his vision getting blurry...

And all of a sudden, the pressure lifted off of him. Inside, he smirked cheekily. Outside, well, he couldn't exactly muster the strength to move his lips, but he'd recover. With a soft application of <Rainfall> he kept himself breathing, and with his desire to live, <Prevailing> kept him going. His vitality was also rather high by now, so he could withstand otherwise rather perilous wounds.

Things happened rather quickly. He was brought to an infirmary, given healing salves and potions, until he sat up. Arber had chased out almost anyone else.

Mercury grinned. "That went smoothly."

He could feel the judgment from the tree's avatar, even through their blank face. "You're an idiot. That was dangerous."

"I don't think so."

"Oh, I *know* so, Mercury. The rulers sometimes forget to control themselves. Especially in times of excitement."

"Then they'll learn," he said with a shrug and a faint smirk. "I feel decent now. How long until they'll wanna speak to me?"

Arber paused. "Thirty minutes, then you have an audience. You and your little..." they gestured vaguely at Uldyrel.

"My new friend and ruler of the court of Appreciation, Uldyrel," Mercury said. Arber's jaw could have dropped.

"The *what?!?*"

The mopaaw smiled softly, watching the child monarch float over his shoulder, calmly observing Arber and listening. "I remade Yearning. It was decaying, so I removed the source of the rot and now it is different altogether."

Arber stared even more. "Mercury, the fae courts don't change so easily. The beliefs about them-

"Those still apply, Arber," the mopaaw said calmly. "I did not destroy it all and start from zero. If Yearning was a castle, then I shifted some furniture around. Emptied out an old storage room, threw away a cursed mirror, and brought in some new things. That is all. The structure itself is the same. Appreciation and Yearning are close enough."

There was another small silence, hanging between them. "A small shift..."

"Small enough to feed into the collective experience of Yearning despite the changes. At least to the point where it can sustain itself. Some of those ideas probably are glancing off now, others taking a stronger hold. It's giving little Uldyrel just enough space to decide who they wanna be themselves. Anything else would be unfair."

Arber nodded slowly. "I see. Still, just how..."

Mercury gently shook his head. "Arber," he reminded them, "my interrogation is in less than half an hour. C'mon. Let me have some tea with people who might become my friends, and go through some of my notifications, will ya?"

"Ah, aye. I suppose that makes sense," they said, awkwardly shifting. "You'll want to go to Daryel's room, then? Itsu is staying with her for now."

"Haha. I doubt you'll be able to willingly split those two up for the next little while."

"... Aye." Arber paused again, collecting themselves. They seemed a little scattered, but given that there were probably hundreds of incarnations more than normal moving around right now, that much was kind of to be expected. "Let us go then?"

"Let's," Mercury nodded, and they were off.

Then, he had tea with Daryel, exactly as he asked for.

It was lovely. Her and Itsu were clearly happy to be in each others' company again, holding hands, kissing every so often. It was adorable. Mercury was happy for them.

Daryel was the one to brew tea, while Itsu pulled a small pouch of soil from somewhere, and with some help from Arber in making a little growing area, quickly magiced up some flowers, weaving them into a wreath as they drank tea.

Giving the gift was a small ceremony, as Itsu placed the wreath on Alice's head gently, before pressing her thumb against one of her sharp canines and pressing a pinprick of blood against one of the flowers, turning its petals red.

It was a rather pretty wreath, though, and soon found itself enveloped by Alice's magic, turning it useful. The flowers would live longer, now, never drying out, and the little circlet would repair itself. It would also let any plants near Alice grow faster, and help her track smells more easily. Small conveniences, as <Kindness> generally promised.

Mercury loved the tea. It tasted of flowers and meadows and sweet memories. Of a long life well lived, and of each day enjoyed to its fullest still.

They talked, too. Itsu talked more about how they'd met, how she, as a mischievous young spirit, had once tried to entrance a village girl - and found herself enchanted in turn. About her life before a spirit, where she died to hunger, and how she remembered giving her last scraps of food to a fox that seemed to be in even more miserable a shape.

In the end, it had curled up against her, and her next memory after going to sleep that night was awaking with a tail and ears and new senses on a rock next to a pond of the most delicious water she'd ever drank.

From there on, life was a lot simpler for her, and she simply chased after her joys. And when the time was right, those joys shifted to incorporate her favourite human girl. Until, one day, they got married.

Daryel aged and she didn't, and that was as tragic as it was beautiful. One day, Itsu knew she would grieve her wife in turn, but that, too, would be a part of life. Being immortal meant seeing loved ones go. There was always a first one.

"Aren't you scared you'll not wanna live anymore?" Alice asked.

Itsu smiled somberly at it. "I am scared of many things. Loss isn't one of them. I will not let fear ruin the time I could be spending in joy. I will be happy as long as I'm allowed, and I will grieve for as long as is needed after, and then I will remember forever. It is as simple as that. And when someone asks, well," her smile turned a little wider. "I'll have a story to tell them."

After saying that, she once more kissed her wife, and that was that.

Mercury, eventually, found some time to look through his notifications. It was necessary, after all. The levels had done a good job of patching him back up, but he still wanted to have his Skills at their strongest for facing the rulers.

So, he dealt with them.

[You have won a <Bet>! Congratulations on surviving. Rewards: 600 Skill points, <Heightened Mana Regeneration> mastery.]

[Your Skills and abilities have levelled up! <Dream Manifestation lv. 1 -> 2>, <Force of the Hecatoncheires lv. 1 -> 2>, <Sever lv. 2 -> 5>, <Thread lv. 4 -> 5>, <Throw lv. 18 -> 21>, <Witnessed lv. 5 -> 7>, <Multitasking lv. 31 -> 33>, <Perceived Ease lv. 1 -> 2>, <Adaptable lv. 8 -> 10>, <Clarity lv. 5 -> 6>, <Dreamwalking lv. 9 -> 10>, <Heightened Mana Regeneration lv. 6 -> 9>, <Itinerant lv. 5 -> 6>, <Oceanic Consciousness lv. 2 -> 3>, <Still Mirror lv. 5 -> 7>, <Truth lv. 1 -> 2>, <Ice Magic lv. 3 -> 4>!]

[Compatible Skills detected. Evolutionary Fusion requirements confirmed. Initiate Evolutionary Fusion of <Unbroken> and <Unfatigued>? (900 Skill Points)]

[<Adaptable> has met the necessary qualifications for evolution. Evolve? (700 Skill points)]

[<Dreamwalking> has met the necessary qualifications for evolution. Evolve? (500 Skill points)]

Those were his Skills. Of course, he had also gained a rather substantial amount of Experience.

[Level Up!]

[Level Up!]

[Level Up!]

[Level Up!]

[Level Up!]

[Level Up!]

[Level Up!]

[Level Up!]

Enough to level *eight* times, in fact. He swallowed dryly. That was a lot. Status?

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Status:

Mercury Rainfall Starlight

Level: 20 -> 28

Species: Srytfyel

Titles: <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: 405/1030

Mp: 234/1595

Sp: 122/717

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Strength: 121 -> 125 (+5)

Vitality: 200 -> 216

Dexterity: 142 -> 154 (+30)

Agility: 166 -> 170 (+30)

Intelligence: 172 -> 185 (+40)

Wisdom: 137 -> 145 (+2)

Willpower: 358 -> 378

Luck: 138 -> 150

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Ability points: 41

World points: 3945

Skill points: 1600

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Gold: 12 864

Beast familiars: 1/2

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He used to have over 100 Ability points. Then he spent 100 on willpower, and now gained 40 back from the levels, so he was at 41. This had made him cross the second willpower milestone, though. Which told him that the second threshold for attributes was at 300. Good to know.

Additionally, he noted the levels had given him 90 points right into his attributes, rather than 80. Which meant he probably pushed himself hard enough to naturally earn some points. Like when he trained strength by trying to climb a tree in the forest.

Except now, he trained willpower by having a whole world collapse onto his mind. Twice. Yes, just like the good old days.

Mercury also noted that he again did not have enough Skill points to evolve all his Skills. He'd also checked <Skill Point Generation> just some time ago, so that one was probably still going. Well, he knew which ones he wanted to evolve out of the batch anyway. So, before that, he decided to look at the quest.

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[Main Quest: "Break them Again" (Chain <2>) completed!]

Reward: <Witnessed> evolution voucher, choice of bound item from suitable list, choice of spell from suitable list.]

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[Choice of bound item initiated. Generating list.]

[1. Virulent Growth

2. Canopy Crown

3. Stifled Silence]

As always, the names were a little ominous. Well, the Dream of Starvation had turned out fine, so how bad could these be?

[Virulent Growth: This item will attune to the wearer's soul and make them more open to physical growth. It can store body parts and compositions, grafting them onto the wearer and modifying their physique when they call on it. Take from your enemies and make yourself greater.]

Oh. Pretty disgusting apparently. Mercury did not, in fact, feel the need to store body parts in some kind of item to then have different grafted versions of himself for different scenarios. No, he was rather fine remaining a simple mopaaw in that case.

[Canopy Crown: You are a ruler, and a ruler must bear a symbol. Brandish the crown and let your authority be known. Crush those of a weaker will. Spread your canopy wide, and see everything that lays beneath your branches. You may inoculate an amount of areas depending on your willpower, within which you may observe everything and express crushing pressure on those you do not will within your kingdom.]

Mercury tilted his head. That was... less bad. Less immediately sinister. Did he still want to be a king, though? This felt like an expression of that desire. It was a question he'd previously have said no to. He didn't want to need to have subjects or anything like that.

At the same time, crowns were cool, and it didn't say he needed loyal subjects at all. Though he suspected those may be necessary for the growth of the item if he picked it. Well, beforehand, he could at least check out the last option.

[Stifled Silence: Yearning did not allow screams within its lands. Let silence hang heavy around you, and have it punish those that break its embrace. Your words, on the other hand, command the world, cutting through the stillness, and carrying true weight. Luminous amber rises to do your bidding.]

Hmmm. Mercury had to think it over. Those last two were both useful for different aspects of what he did. Perception or area control. He had more abilities for the second, so stacking another one on top would probably do more. But having more avenues of perception might be nice.

At the end, though, he thought about what part of yearning had been fearsome, and decided to pick the Stifled Silence.

[Got: Stifled Silence (bound).]

It was somewhat simple. The pressure from the ruler had been fearsome, yes. And its ability to see within Yearning's domain was also incredible. But the pressure had only been dangerous to Mercury from within its body. Meanwhile, the amber... was terrifying. Mercury had needed to resist it with <Rainfall> and <Truth> combined from the moment he entered that realm.

This was a somewhat changed version of that power. It was more sombre. Quiet, in a way. He rather liked the "silence" aspect. Though he was careful to not summon it, since seeing a reminder of that place would probably bother Itsu.

Still, he could see it within his dreamscape, hovering around the silver sun. Tree branches and antlers, both sculpted from silver, interwove to encase an amber gem, magic glimmering within it. The item could be a circlet, or a ring, or a wristband; anything, essentially, as long as it was circular.

Mercury smiled faintly. He had acquired another method to quiet the world when he was overstimulated. Amazing.

Once again, he was going to use the sinister drops of his great foes to simply deal with everyday problems. As was the way of ingenuity.

Moving on, he opened the spell list.

[Choice of spell initiated. Generating list.]

[1. <Consume>

2. <Manifest>

3. <Shift>

4. <Grow>]

[<Consume>: Your stomach is boundless. This spell generates an energy storage that can be filled by “consuming” ambient matter. Synergy with <nutritional Preservation> detected. Consumed energy/matter can be used to boost skills, restore stamina, or replace food.]

The idea of the spell was nice, but Mercury still didn’t have that great an interest in eating rocks. And while it synergized with <Nutritional Preservation>... it also didn’t add that much? If the Skill evolved, it might let him eat rocks, too, and digest them. It might let him empower other Skills, too.

A decent contender, but by no means too incredible.

[<Manifest>: Create something that was not there before, specializing in living matter. Give yourself temporary arms, ghostly branches, tentacles or maws. Your close combat Skills can be triggered by these appendages.]

That one was also good. Especially for being able to actually make better use of <Bite> by summoning a mouth at the end of a branch or something. It would make him a much better and more unpredictable close combat fighter. It was also just... convenient. A strong contender.

[<Shift>: Change a living thing into something else. Flesh and bone is a canvas for you to paint on. Turn skin to fur or bark to fungus. The vicissitudes of life ebb and flow at your beck and call.]

Another very strong contender. Mercury specifically noted that it was, in some ways, a *healing* spell. If he could shift flesh, then he could most likely mend it, too. <Intuition> also told him that conclusion was right. Which immediately shot the Skill up in its rankings.

Agh, what a pain. Now he wanted both. Still, one more to look at.

[<Grow>: Enhance the speed at which life moves. Grow plants quicker for a soon harvest, ment wounds quicker at the cost of the body consuming itself, make cells multiply faster to age someone, or direct that growth to be harmful and cancerous.]

This one also could fulfill that healing role, but it felt more... limited. Less magical. Probably because it needed to consume more nutrients for it, and the damaging part was a little strange. He didn't exactly wanna cause cancers in anyone, even his enemies.

No, that one was out.

It was between <Shift> and <Manifest>. Potential against convenience... he knew what he was picking.

[Acquired the Spell <Shift lv. 1> as a reward.]

Next up, evolutions, and then, onto the fae courts.