

Chapter 223: Practice makes Perfect

Mercury read the letter over a second time, then placed it down. The moment it left his hands, it burst into flames, reducing itself to ash, before that ash turned to air. All that remained in the wake of the letter was a small draft within Mercury's log.

Its contents, though, were seared into his mind. Some of the fae were going to die. Frankly, it wasn't really unexpected. Oberon had been getting in his way at every step of the path, and he expected both Blood and Allure to give more trouble than they really could afford to. Ever so slightly Mercury tilted his head.

How would they die, though?

He wasn't going to kill them. That much Mercury was certain of. He was a lot of things. He was a murderer, too. He'd killed before. He probably would again. That thought didn't exactly leave him calm, but it was one he had filed away and decided to live with. It didn't change who he was.

But right now, he could not see himself killing the rulers of the fae courts. Especially because he was, simply put, not strong enough. It would take exceptional circumstances for him to kill one of them, circumstances he doubted would come about so easily. There was no reason for Titania to lie to him, though.

She couldn't exactly see into the future, but she had ruled the fae realm for far longer than Mercury had even existed. She was as ancient as spring itself, and with that age came a certain knowledge on cycles.

Just as Mercury had worried less about each day as time went on back on Earth, he expected Titania might be a little more nonchalant about the courts' rulers changing than most of the others. He wondered, though. Had Oberon always been faerie king? Had Titania always been queen, actually?

He assumed so, but there was no way to really know. Other than ask, he supposed. Maybe he would do so next time Titania showed up.

Mercury gave a soft sigh. He appreciated the warning. There had been a few more words on the paper, asking him to be careful whom he trusted, and to take care of himself and keep going in his actions. That stability must come, even if the cost is great.

Titania had shown herself to support his actions, both in person and with the letter she sent. Mercury wasn't exactly a fan of monarchs, but as far as the rulers of the fae courts went, there were worse than her. Maybe he'd start a second revolution later?

That thought placed a smirk on his face. Mercury took a deep breath, then let out a longer yawn. He decided, then, that he didn't feel like returning to the bed. Instead, he wrapped himself in the dracoleather cloak and used his cloudmatter shawl as both a mattress and a pillow.

Once more, he learnt that by now, the floor made a fine bedding. Mercury smirked, then closed his eyes. He was a little tired, so even though he didn't really need to, he slept.

It was a quiet, calm night.

Part of that was, of course, thanks to the interwoven silver branches and amber gem of the Stifled Silence.

Mercury awoke in the fields of his mindscape, seeing them slowly reshaping, the threads from the nexus holding the landscape together. It was like one big painting, bits of it slowly being picked up and shifted, as the garden in its centre grew. He walked along budding trees planted by Kim.

The gardener greeted Mercury with a nod and an "Evening, Boss." The first gesture was quickly returned, but Mercury didn't feel in a particularly conversational mood. So, he walked.

For a long few moments, Mercury simply marched ever forward, through his mindscape. Past trees, past waterfalls, past beautiful oases and all of that. Just... walked.

He still saw the landmarks. The fountain to the south and the citadel to the north. The sinister mountains to the east and the citadel to the west. They were closer, now. Mercury was sure they were. Especially the fountain and the citadel, but ever since he had learnt more of shadow, the sinister mountains grew closer, too.

What was inside one of those landmarks? Mercury truly wanted to know, and it was a question that neither Appy nor <Truth> or <Intuition> were able to easily answer. Really, his inner realm was still so much of a mystery to him. It was both real and not, both a part of him, and yet separate. Others could live there while he was gone, and he could call it into the real world, and shunt others out, and add new pieces...

Yet it also changed when he did. When he was sad, it was full of shadows. When he was happy, the sun shone brightly. Faint raindrops coalesced in the sky. Those, at least, were part of the nexus rank increase, rather than his mood.

Then again, today did feel like a rainy night. Mercury smiled up as drops pelted his back, sliding off the dracoleather cloak. He loved that item. All its functions and the way it almost seemed to read his mood. When he wanted to get rained on, it let the rain through, and when he wanted to be dry, it even affected his fur, keeping him warm and comfortable.

All the abilities the cloak developed also made it a little more like a bound item. It repaired itself and cleaned itself. In fact, its ability to clean itself was better than that of bound items. The Dream of Starvation and even the Stifled Silence only repaired themselves when hovering around the silver sun in here.

But the cloak? It was always putting itself back together. Mercury loved it for that. He smiled, happy at this first acquisition. The system sure had a way of creating stories, didn't it? It granted unique, growing items so that those memories of earlier adventures could accompany one forever onwards. So that one didn't forget.

As he marched through the soft grass, feeling it brush against his fur, Mercury thought about the system. It was, after all, rather strange for a world to be dominated by game-like rules. One might even say that it made no sense at all, logically.

Why would magic work in neat blue boxes, with levels and skills like there were on earth? Wasn't it arrogant in that way? It all fit so neatly into boxes humans could imagine. Well, not all, of course. Mercury would be hard pressed to explain what zeyjn or ihn'ar felt like to his own self back when he'd been on Earth.

But still. It was strange. Stranger still that he was rather sure everyone and everything had the system. Plants. Insects. Even bacteria, maybe. What were their stats, he wondered. Beneath one? Surely a bacteria didn't have a full point of vitality. That would create strange effects.

He smiled at the thought of super-bacteria, then decided that yes, they were probably scaled to a different stat baseline. Appy confirmed it for him. Something about their evolutionary tiers being lower.

There was also no absolute zero or first tier. No beginning and no end. The system just kept going bigger and stronger, and it didn't really have a minimum level implemented either. There was *functionally* a minimum; things weren't really recognized as capable of desire past a certain level, but it was still strange to think about.

If there was a lifeform out there that was a single atom big... it, too, would have access to the system. To levelling up. Evolving. Growing, until it was a match for the current Mercury. And he wondered, for a long moment, what the point behind that was.

Desire.

Eventually, it all came back to that. What Appy called the central tenet of the system. It would grant everyone who had it the things they desired, if they worked towards them. The higher their desire, the higher the reward. Mercury took a deep breath.

His rise had been in part because of what he desired above all. Freedom. Life. Knowledge. That was what his Skills were geared to give him. To let him go wherever he wanted to go, and see whatever he wanted to see,

Something clicked. Mercury looked at the distant landmarks. Fountain, Citadel, Castle, Mountains. He had been waiting for the landmarks to come closer to him, waiting to explore them when the time was right and being all patient about it.

But was that really what he was all about? Was he the type of person to look at something in the distance and wait for it to come to him, or would he walk until he was there?

Of course, in this case, walking was pointless. The distance between him and the object decreased by a meaninglessly small amount. They were still just as far away as when he'd started walking. Yet, it wasn't just that simple anymore, was it?

Mercury hadn't even used <Itinerant> or <Reinforcement Dash> or his newest Skill, <Voidwalker>. Then again, he was unsure if he wanted to try such a potentially destructive

Skill for the first time within his mindscape. Shattering this place would not bode well for him, given how the last attack on the silver sun had made him feel.

But playing that one aside, Mercury still had the others at his claws. So, he activated the evolved form of <Dash> and began to run. For now, he chose the fountain, since that one seemed rather familiar. It reminded him of Ruvah and their time in the ashen plains was still vivid in his mind. Really, he doubted he would ever be able to forget that experience at all.

And despite the torture and pain, he didn't want to forget, either.

Every bit of suffering Mercury had gone through was part of what made him who he was. Would he want to go through it all again? No, of course not. He would love to have things be easier... but he sure had a habit of choosing the more difficult path when presented a choice. He was a little stubborn, after all.

Acknowledging all that, Mercury triggered <Itinerant>, and <Truth>. The first let him find paths, open them, make them faster, and tread forward. The second let him see past falsehoods and imposed limits and arrive at the heart of things.

As he triggered the Skills, Mercury felt a certain resistance.

The air itself seemed to push back on him. As he tried to open a path, it felt like the connection warbled and choked, forcing him to hold it open by force. He felt the mindscape writhe at the idea, the fountain shift and move and grow further away as he wanted to keep it close.

But through all that distance, he had already latched onto it. Was looking at the <Truth> of it. <Witnessed> it. There was a tether there, and whenever the path warped and shifted and threatened to close, all Mercury needed to do was follow the golden string, like Theseus going after the golden thread.

And he did. Mercury sprinted after the connection, each step of his clearing as much distance as five, each one carrying him closer to the dungeon. The scenery blurred around him, as he used his agility to press on ever faster, using his strength to make himself lighter.

He barrelled through the air, twisting and turning in tiny motions whenever the path did, too. He went so fast, so far that the sky above shifted a little, the patchwork turning faintly greener, like he was pressing into the unexplored wilderness of his mindscape. In a way, he was.

The already high grass grew even higher, until it was basically enough to entirely hide Mercury, towering over his head. Still he followed the tether.

Hours ticked by and he dug deeper into his stamina, trying to keep up with the ever moving fountain, and finding himself slightly inadequate. He kept pace, tough. He was getting close, but just barely. And he didn't want to get too far from the silver sun and nexus.

This far out, he could feel the world start to thin. Frankly, he was almost shocked at how far out he could go, but such was the consequence of absorbing more than two worlds. A chunk of Joy's, and more of Yearning's twice over.

Eventually, Mercury sighed, then stopped and turned back. He didn't want to go looking for the end of this inner world of his. That was why he hadn't used <Voidwalker>, after all. So he trudged back, grumbling faintly.

At least it gave him another good chance to practice his ice magic.

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As on most days, the next morning eventually came. Mercury woke up from his sleep with little effort. That was part of the benefit of being able to split his mind three ways and recharge faster than he expended mental power, he hardly felt sleepy, ever.

It had highlighted to him when he was just mentally overexerting himself, though. Like with the surgery on Sibori. But, well, if he wanted to grow, he had to push his limits a little. He still gave a small yawn, half out of habit, and half because it did him well to indulge some more human tendencies.

Well. Mortal tendencies, he supposed. Wasn't really very human when he wasn't human.

Some days it still shocked him how little that bothered him. Would he still want to be human again? Often, yes. He missed being a little taller, and being treated with personhood immediately. But if he could eventually get a shapeshifting power, would he always run around as a human?

Mercury doubted it.

By now, he could imagine that his balance on two legs might even feel off, being so used to having four of them and a tail. Still amused by those ambient thoughts, he strolled out into the hallways of Shadow.

The grand caverns full of ancient furniture and inky abysses of darkness that Mercury sometimes gave little waves to greeted him, and he walked through them to the breakfast hall. The table was set, with Ciarski, Omoria, Alice and Orin already eating. Most of it was fae food, but they had prepared some rather mundane meals for him.

Some mashed potatoes, fluffy bread, jam, that kinda stuff. He smiled as he dug in, liberally using <Force of the Hecatoncheires> to manipulate the foodstuffs. It was good to act mortal *sometimes*, not all the time, and he'd be damned if he wasn't going to use magic in his everyday life.

"You're leaving today, aren't you, benefactor?" Ciarski asked.

Mercury halted for a second, having been just about to take his first bite. He turned to look at the ruler of Shadow, now with a name and purpose and renewed self. "Yes," he said. "Today I will move on. I think my next destination is Rust."

"You think?" Omoria asked. "If you're unsure, why not stay a while longer?"

"No, I won't do that," Mercury shook his head. "It has been rather nice here, but I want to continue doing this. I want to help where I can, and see the entire fae realm. This realm of Shadow has been beautiful to see, but it is by far not everything the fae realm has to offer."

Alice nodded with a smile. "A shame we won't visit Skye. I always enjoyed their castles of clouds."

"Too much blue for me," Orin quietly complained. "Makes me feel like I'm stranded."

Mercury gave the fae a telekinetic pat of reassurance. "Never stranded when I'm along," he said with a smile and some decently founded confidence. He hadn't taken the Sill evolution focused on bringing others with him, but he was still reasonably sure he would be able to, with some effort.

That was how the system worked, after all. Desire something enough, use your abilities enough, and you could make it happen. Mercury smiled, then took a proper bite from his breakfast.

"It was a pleasure having you here, Yr'enzel," Ciarski spoke with gravitas. "You've done me a great favour, and the court of Shadow recognizes your efforts."

The mopaaw nodded again. "I hear you. My stay has been pleasant as well. But I truly must be off now."

With that, he hopped off his chair, onto the ground. Soon, the scraping of wood on wood followed, as Alice and Orin rose as well. Ciarski gave a wave. "I'll see you off then," the ruler said, and Omoria stood with them.

Acknowledging the two of them, Mercury began walking to the exit. He passed by younger shadows and older ones, and he seemed happy with the change that had already occurred within the court. Then, he found himself in that grand archway that revealed the outside world in all its strange, dark beauty.

Mercury smiled, and turned back. "Omoria, Ciarski. I will see you again, I am sure."

"Have a nice trip," Omoria said with a big wave.

"Safe tidings. Let me provide adequate transportation, too," Ciarski said with a smirk, and with a wave of their hand, there stood a carriage of shadow.

It was sort of amusing how used to that method of travel Mercury had grown by now. He would have thought that going somewhere via carriage was boring - and in a lot of ways, it really was. But well, taking time to get somewhere simply meant that you had to keep yourself occupied during the journey.

So, Mercury wasn't bored. He simply spent every minute on the road practicing.

Even as the carriage doors closed behind him, he was already giddy with excitement again, splitting his mind three ways. Then, they were off, and Mercury partook in the sacred duty of waving out the window with a third of his self.

The other two parts were already again practicing <Ice Magic> and manipulating the <Dreamweave>.

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And so, more time passed. Mercury practiced his magic, absorbed more mana, and how to manipulate the <Dreamweave>.

The second was easiest. It was familiar, and not too troublesome. He simply drew power from the ambient atmosphere and claimed it as his own. Once the mana was in his core, there was no way out. This was more of an exercise in filling his core, because Mercury wanted more mana to experiment with and fuel his abilities.

Doing more magic was also somewhat intuitive. He practiced transforming his mana faster, channelling it into the few spells he knew. Creating icicles and launching them, making ice cubes, chilling mists, freezing the floor... rather basic ice-things. But he became faster at it, and slowly, he began seeing some patterns in how the spells functioned.

His efforts in learning better <Dreamweaving> bore much less fruit. It was, simply put, difficult. His understanding was still pitiful. He had only touched it a few times, barely managed to take enough of it to weave a stack of office papers. Because of that barrier, which made it seem hard, too, Mercury didn't even get much benefit from <Perceived Ease>.

It was challenging and frustrating and he loved it. Because despite everything, despite the trouble it gave him, it felt like that was almost how it was supposed to be. If it were easier, it wouldn't be weaving. And his progress was already fast.

According to Uunrahzil, Mercury had learned just fine at the beginning. Now, with more Skills at learning quickly? He was a prodigy.

Not because he started out as particularly impressive. No one did, after all. But the further Mercury advanced in skill and Skills, the easier it became to see the connections between different disciplines. He saw more, understood more.

Ihn'ar was another perfect example of that. Breaching the veils of gold and iridescence were, initially, meant to help understand different things. Understand the grass and the water and the wind, as Mercury had done. But now? He also used it to learn, for runecrafting, for smithing, to clear his mind.

So, bit by bit, he was creating his own framework of understanding. Knowing more about <Ancient Shadowweaving> would feed into understanding <Nothingness> and even <Ice Magic> which would in turn feed his understanding of <Water>. He had built himself a network, and sat in the centre of it all himself.

All he needed to do was practice and find perspectives and experiences he resonated with. It was just a matter of time before he got better at weaving dreams. Before he learnt how to peek into things that should be incomprehensible to his mind. All he had to do was practice, like any other thing one wanted to learn.

Like with everything, he started out as not particularly skilled, but improved as he went along.

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The landscape outside the windows changed as the journey went on. Bit by bit the monochrome of Shadow disappeared. Colours clawed their way back into everything, suns rose above again. There were canyons again, at first. Towering red-brown rocks and deep ravines carved in between them.

Inside the rocks were hives and world eaters and creatures that attacked Mercury as he sat inside the carriage. He practiced his magic in those moments, too.

Shadow and ice really were a rather lovely combination, he found. His shadows were rather conducive to spreading frost around. It was cold and dark when he willed it to be such. Freezing mist would absorb and diffuse light, allowing the shadows to more easily spread, bringing rimes of frost with them.

Then, the cold would make everyone sluggish, and the shadows could restrain them. Both types of magic were perfectly capable of creating sharp objects.

[Level Up!]

Mercury went to level 30 that way, but the message didn't really matter that much. He was more focussed on his trip to Rust. Already, he felt a little excited and a little worried about his stay with Rust. Shadow was something he already had perspective on. He was... less than optimistic about his second attempt going just as well.

This time he at least had more experience in naming, so that would surely help. All a matter of time. He would have to see, and have confidence in his own abilities.

More days ticked by, and Mercury steadily grew himself. His zeyjn became able to wield more ystirs, each split mind of his able to process more information. It was a strange feeling, really.

Mercury couldn't really explain it either, but training his mind this way felt... special. In a weird way, it was almost like the world became easier to parse. His mind kept up with dozens of noises and bright colours and swift turns. He could focus enough to slow down time, he didn't need to sleep or rest if he didn't overexert himself.

Having the world become so much easier to interact with was a nice side-benefit of his powers. Because it wasn't just that he didn't *need* to sleep; he didn't want to anymore, either. Of course, some of his minds spent time in his mindscape, where time flowed faster. That, too, was a bizarre experience, but one Mercury could deal with.

But when he was a human, back on Earth? He'd been so overwhelmed by his job. Tired, constantly. He would come home and collapse into bed, weary and wrung dry. Now? If he did the work that the Steve of back then did, he would do it *easily*. In fact, he could do dozens of times more work.

By now, he was sure that each stat very fundamentally changed him. Details about his daily life were no longer the same. He didn't feel pain the same way anymore, his coordination was better, and he could think faster. If he tried his best he could probably rip a tree out of the earth with his bare hands, no Skills required.

That was a little terrifying. Mercury smiled, faintly. He was a little terrifying, huh?

Once again, he wondered about the nature of Skills. Why were they granted? Or, perhaps, they weren't granted at all and instead earned? It was a thought with no logical conclusion.

"Appy, where did the system come from?" he asked.

[Incalculable. Processing loops active since beginning of this universe.]

Huh. That was... quite a while. "What about before that?"

[Answer ingenerable. Insufficient authority. Likely answers generated by autonomous intelligence: One, there was no system before this universe. Two, there was something beforehand that is being kept secret from the individual.]

Mercury gave a small nod at that. He smiled. There were more mysteries to uncover.

Somehow, that made him happy. Was he almost worried he'd run out of things to look at? That made him laugh, just a little. How silly was that? Worried about running out of things to get when he had so much still to do? Mercury smirked at himself, shaking his head.

Then, he looked outside the window, at the fae realm. This was where he was right now. Even just in the fae realm, there was so much still to see. In fact...

Bit by bit, the canyons all around were receding, and soon, they passed through that imperceptible bubble. The fringes of the world stopped gnawing at Mercury, seeking to see him unmade. Instead, what he smelled was... salt?

There was a court of Salt, but that was not where they were. Because the court of Salt was, by Mercury's estimation, one of the healthier ones. No, this was Rust.

But the smell persisted. Mercury looked outside the window and saw... so much.

An ocean, sparkling in the light of a dozen tiny suns. Thousands of broken buildings. Rotting metropolises. Broken glass and rusting steel dotted the landscape, stretching even further into the horizon than the water.

It was almost a symbiosis, it felt like. New things, new metals, dragged up from the rocks ground, made into beacons of progress, then rotted and rusted away by the uncaring winds and rain. Maybe Rust should have sat between Salt and Skye? Mercury kept that little joke to himself.

Instead, he simply passed his eyes over the uncanny citiscapes again. They were familiar, yet alien. Except, they weren't. Mercury saw, oxidized over as ever, pieces of the statue of liberty.

Because apparently, that was rust, too.