

Chapter 191: Systematic Dealing and Duels

Status:

Mercury Rainfall Starlight

Level: 7 -> 15

Species: Srytfyel

Titles: <Successor>, <Star Usurper>, <Trialist>, <Patient Learner>, <Mountain Usurper>, <Tenacious Genius>, <Forest Usurper>, <Tutorial Completer>

Alias: Beast, Mittens, dum-dum, Yr'Enzel

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Hp: 349/950

Mp: 1020/1020

Sp: 597/597

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Strength: 118 (+5) -> 121

Vitality: 180 -> 200

Dexterity: 117 (+15) -> 127

Agility: 148 (+15) -> 151

Intelligence: 167 (+40) -> 172

Wisdom: 123 (+2) -> 133

Willpower: 183 -> 213

Luck: 111 -> 126

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Ability points: 76

World points: 2397

Skill points: 1000

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Gold: 14 853

Beast familiars: 1/2

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Holy hell. He'd gained eight levels.

Eight levels. Not from any experience from killing the thing, either. Just from his desire to survive. That was... incredible.

Despite the levels, his health was still in the gutter. Which was probably because, with him bleeding it out, it would've been on a constant drain, rather than falling once, then being restored. At least, right now, it wasn't falling anymore, and instead ticking upwards.

Then again, his physical body felt... mostly fine, now. He'd even gained a couple points in strength and agility from his time with Arber. Was that worth the agony he'd gone through?

No, probably not, Mercury decided. It was, however, a good step in terms of getting his revenge. His increased willpower would help him keep a grip on his mana, and help him hold onto his idea of old Uunrahzil as well, luckily.

But, of course, his skills had levelled up quite a bit more.

[Your Skills and Abilities have levelled up: <Sever lv. 1 -> 2>, <Witnessed lv. 3 -> 4>, <Nutritional Preservation lv. 4 -> 5>, <Survivor lv. 4 -> 8>, <Unbroken lv. 3 -> 6>, <Unfatigued lv. 5 -> 8>, <Unrestrained lv. 3 -> 5>, <Adaptable lv. 5 -> 7>, <Astral Body lv. 7 -> 9>, <Clarity lv. 3 -> 4>, <Daydream lv. 9 -> 12>, <Dreamwalking lv. 8 -> 9>, <Itinerant lv. 1 -> 3>, <Still Mirror lv. 2 -> 3>, <Vast Mind lv. 8 -> 10>, <Mana Expansion lv. 1 -> 2>!]

[<Daydream> has met the necessary qualifications for evolution! Evolve? (300 Skill Points)]

[<Vast Mind> has met the necessary qualifications for evolution! Evolve? (900 Skill Points)]

Ah. Now that was troublesome. But he hadn't checked in on <Skill Point Generation> in a while!

[Acquired 100 Skill points!]

[<Skill Point Generation> has levelled up! <Skill Point Generation lv. 2 -> 3>]

Shame. Well, that meant he could only evolve one of the Skills. The day was bound to come sometime. And his quest for informing people still hadn't ended. Wasn't it about time he got another main quest? He had two slots for it!

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[Main Quest: "Give a Paw, they'll Take the Cat."]

Condition: Remain your own master until you are back outside the fae realm. You are wanted, but you will not become a toy.

Reward: <Itinerant> mastery, <Unrestrained> mastery, 700 Skill Points.

Extra Condition: A seat of the broken thrones sought to have you as theirs. They harmed your own. Break them.

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

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See, now *that* was far more reasonable. Mercury could feel that the extra condition had something to do with <Trialist>, it honestly felt like the System was making half a bet with him. Mercury could tell, though, that he would win that bet. He had no intention of losing to the empty throne. They had taken something from him, and he would have it back.

But, he had also taken something of theirs. And before he evolved his Skills, it was time to analyze those gains.

[<Mana Veins Residue>: The broken and crushed parts of another's astral body. Their fragments were ground down to chunks, then sand, then dust. This pile is what remains. It may be consumed in order to reinforce your own astral body, or can be made into astrally bound items. Residual mana clings to this pile of residue. May be imbued into a weapon to let it strike at the astral. Grade: B]

That was the description of the quartz sand that was left behind. This came from the parts of the invader old Uunrahzil had crushed to bits. The pile of residue was magnificently preserved, and somehow a perfectly uniform pile. He could probably hand this to Yasashiku. Maybe to bind his cloak?

Having his cloak bound would be lovely...

[The individual is reminded that astrally bound and a bound item are not the same.]

Appy's voice shook him out of those thoughts. 'What's the difference, then?'

[Bound items will always be with the user, regardless of their state. Astral bindings are inferior states of binding, in which the items will break if the user's astral body is damaged.]

Hmmm... that made it a whole lot less appealing. Essentially, the Dream of Starvation would be with him forever, no matter what. But if something happened like what happened just last night, that would probably have been enough to destroy any astrally bound items, wouldn't it?

[Correct. The individual's astral body took significant damage in the exchange with the seat of the empty thrones. Future collisions are recommended only when advantages are significantly stacked in the individual's favour.]

That was also a fair point. 'Thanks, Appy.'

[The dum-dum is welcome!]

In that case, maybe it was better to infuse it into the Dream of Starvation?

[The Dream of Starvation is already capable of affecting other individuals' astral bodies.]

Right, so that was a bust, too. 'Is there any way to increase the residue's power and create a properly bound item?'

There was a long silence, but eventually, Appy answered.

[... Confirmed. The possibility exists. The item would need to be elevated to at least Unique B Grade, or A Grade. This may be possible by collecting a greater amount of material, or by infusing the material with a greater deal of magic. Blending it with other potent substances may also function. Additionally, it may be elevated by completing an archway clear quest or through a difficult <Bet>.]

Mercury smiled 'Thanks, Appy. You're a gem.' He knew what needed to be done, then. For now, he would just keep the residue. With that in mind, Mercury checked the next item, the bit of moving shadow he got from the creature of the void.

[<Voidling's Remains>: Through the wound of worlds, the nothingness outside entered. You cut off its head, then killed that part, too. Now, all that's left of this nameless dead demigod is a writhing mass of hatred and hunger. If you wish to know destruction, bear witness, it lays before you. Don't feed it. Grade: A]

... And what was he supposed to use that for.

[You may use this to learn destruction magic. You may also analyze it to become more familiar with <Nothingness>. However, success is hardly guaranteed.]

Were there any uses that didn't involve destruction and devastation?

[Due to the material's semi-life, it may be possible to feed it to the Dream of Starvation.]

Reasonable. Honestly, that thing was probably the most destructive item he carried. Well, really, it wasn't much of a contest. It was also still repairing itself, after carving a chunk out of the fae. Actually, how was that coming along?

[Dream of Starvation, repairing:

Grade: Bound C - Proficiency (623/1000)

Rank: 0 - Growth (1253/1000)]

[The Dream of Starvation has consumed a fragment of a dragon. It had consumed a fragment of a seat of the empty thrones. Would you like to increase its rank?]

Oh, so that was a prompt he needed to open. Good to know for the future. 'Yes.'

[Error. Rank cannot be increased while the item is damaged. Please retry once the item has repaired itself.]

Mercury stared at the notifications with a bit of a blank expression, then shook his head with mild annoyance. How damaged was the item, actually?

He could tell that he could still summon it despite the damage. There was, however, a risk of it being permanently destroyed if it was damaged further. That was something he'd honestly love to avoid.

Still, he wanted to check up on the damage, and he was currently within the safety of his room for another little while. So, after a moment of thinking, Mercury summoned up the Dream of Starvation.

As always, the liquid metal manifested, slowly wrapping around his paws, rather than encasing them, however, it was different this time. None of the armor or defense up his legs appeared, with there instead only being a thin film of the material on his fur, more like an undershirt than anything else.

The claws themselves were short and cracked. There wasn't enough material to properly form the menacing weapon it was supposed to be. Instead the metal wrapped around him in cracked bands and thin cloth-like structures.

It was almost a sad sight, and Mercury quickly dispelled the item again. There was no point in keeping it summoned like this, so he let the weapon dissolve back into his dreamscape, hovering below the silver sun to restore itself.

He'd feed it the bit of liquid shadow eventually. For now, there was one last item Mercury had to look at. Would there be a description by now? A short glance revealed nothing, so he pulled more heavily on <Seeker of Secrets>. Eventually, the item gave.

[<Antlers of the Horned Rot>: Divinity looms large, but a small injury is a great achievement. You have torn antlers off the monster's head. Tear off the whole thing, next time. The essence of rot is held within this fragment. Shape it into an item, make a potion out of it, or learn from it. Take what you can. Leave nothing behind. Grade: S]

What an item it was, too. The system seemed to... somewhat mirror his thoughts. Or the thoughts of the thing's domain. The Horned Rot. Mercury could tell that it had seemingly spread decay around itself, though having that connected to rot made sense.

The antlers felt like a heavy responsibility to have. He could certainly make something out of them, but he didn't yet know what. Maybe some enchanted jewellery? Probably that. He'd see, though. All in due time.

For now, he was happy just having it as a reminder. An item to tear the damn thing's entire head off... that he could live with. Mercury held back the sinister smile, and focused on his Skills again.

He had to choose what to evolve. <Daydream> or <Vast Mind>? Both were very valid choices. <Vast Mind> cost more, which generally hinted at a more powerful Skill. Then

again, nothing had cost nearly as much as <Seeker of Secrets>, which didn't always help in the middle of combat.

Appy grumbled slightly, but couldn't disagree. So, while <Vast Mind> was an amazing Skill, he thought that <Daydream> might have more potential. The Skill had stuck around for a long while, after all, gained a lot of mastery after the last confrontation, and also seemed to align well with his skillset. 'Evolve <Daydream>.'

[Evolution confirmed. Engaging. Please pick an option to evolve the Skill into. The price will be the same (300 Skill points), no matter which you choose.]

[1. <Dream Manifestation>

2. <Visualize>

3. <Creative Application>]

He called up the descriptions.

[<Dream Manifestation>: Your dreamscape is where you are the most powerful. It is always with you. Use this Skill, and call a part of it to the here and now, manifesting your dreamscape. Suppresses environmental effects, enemy powers, and enhances all your Skills.]

That was incredible. Plain and simple. Mercury knew how much power one wielded in a dreamscape, after all. When he had invaded the dreams of the assassins, it had almost gone poorly when one of them wished to expel him. And he had even managed to defeat something with divinity in his own dream, even if it was just a fragment. This was strong competition already.

[<Visualize>: If you can see it, you can make it happen. This Skill assists in the seeing aspect. You may try to predict the actions an enemy can take, or the way you can apply your abilities, then bring those visualizations into reality.]

Another good Skill. But... this one seemed like it helped him control his Skills. See where they would go, then execute that, exactly.

Wasn't it something he could replicate with enough practice? If he just got good at using his Skills, wouldn't that be that? Hm. He called up the final Skill description before he got to a conclusion.

[<Creative Application>: This Skill has no effect by itself. It does, however, allow the user to analyze, deconstruct, and apply their Skills in ways they weren't quite meant to be used. Twist Skill effects onto others rather than yourself, apply them over a distance, and other such spectacles!]

This Skill was definitely more of a contender, Mercury knew that. It seemed... whimsical, almost. In the same way that daydream was whimsical. And it also seemed to fit him rather well...

But he was angry right now. He didn't want a fun Skill to explore the world. Plus, there was already some give to the Skills. He knew he could stretch them. That same way he had made mock-hands from <Telekinesis>, or used <Itinerant> offensively to trip others in his way.

Skills weren't lines drawn into the sand. They could be enhanced and used cleverly. Some just had more give than others. This would make them more malleable, sure, but he could figure it out himself.

Mercury selected <Dream Manifestation>.

[The individual has acquired the Skill <Dream Manifestation> through Skill evolution!]

Gaining the Skill felt like a broken spade was placed in his hands. He could clearly spin it around, maybe even use it, but it wouldn't properly work yet. Cuz the tool wasn't quite right.

His dreamscape had been damaged, after all, so that was to be expected. But it would heal. Mercury grit his teeth. It *would heal*.

After the evolution, he still had 800 Skill points left, which was not quite enough for him to evolve <Vast Mind>. But that was fine. That one might just sit and gather more options, until he was ready.

For now, his time to relax would be used to the best of his ability. With no hesitation, Mercury got out his log, and laid the Blanket of Dreams over himself. With moments, he was out like a light.

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Another half hour later, he was back to being awake, despite his body's protests. Everything seemed to creak as he moved. It felt like his joints were rusty, and his bones porous and hollow. His muscles felt like the only part of him that wished to actually work.

Then he woke up one of his other ystirs, sending his current one back to sleep. Ahhh, that felt better. The world came into focus just a little more. Mercury splashed his face with water, despite the fact that he found the wetness slightly uncomfortable.

Finally, once he felt ready, he took a deep breath. Breakfast was a time of peace. The food had actually been meant for him to eat. There were no drugs in it, and no poison either. Now, however, he was back in the political fray.

When he left his room, he was conjuring up his own air to breathe again, using <Rainfall>. Maybe <Wind> could do something similar, but he wasn't familiar enough yet to risk it. Slowly, he made his way down the hall, and after only the first couple steps, Arber was at his side.

Before he entered the courtyard, for that is where the challenges would be happening, Alice had joined them as well, appearing with a small gust of wind and a polite greeting. The bags under her eyes seemed a little smaller, something which Mercury was grateful for.

After another moment to gather himself, he used <Force of the Hecatoncheires> to push the door to the outside open.

It was his first time getting a longer look at the fae realm, since they were, somewhat, out in the middle of it. The reason he said “somewhat” was that, despite the open sky, there were wooden fences all around them.

They were in the middle of a forest, which was a husk of itself. Dozens of dead trees stood lifelessly, the ground covered in sooty ash. There were living trees, though, intermingled with the dead ones - each bit of life an extension of Arber.

None of those splotches of brown and green were actually different trees. It was all pieces of the main tree. That struck Mercury as rather sad.

At least the lampposts, rising from the fence to cast the courtyard into light, were rather pretty, wooden things with leaves to disperse the light, shedding a warm, golden glow.

Slowly, Mercury trudged forward, to the arenas for the challenges. Many of them were simple things, circles drawn into the floor. Fae were already gathering, and the first few youths stepped forward into the circles.

Just then, Asher, the fiery fae from yesterday, stepped next to him. He was radiating heat, wearing a shroud of fire over his skin of lava. It fell around his shoulders like an ornate, crimson cloak with golden embroidery, starkly contrasting his raven hair.

“Shall we start, Mercury?” the boisterous fae asked, his voice loud enough to be heard by anyone in the courtyard.

The mopaaw felt his ears ache slightly at the noise, but held back a wince. This was nothing compared to the other agony he’d gone through.

“Certainly, Asher,” he said. “Simply pick an Arena. I shall follow you there, if it suits me.”

Asher gave him a fiery smile, imitating lips and teeth made from white incandescent for a moment, before his face returned to a featureless mask. “Acceptable,” he said, though the word rang out as if he was at odds with it.

He must despise the sneakiness of fae culture, Mercury concluded. That was something he could make use of.

Soon, not too long later, they found themselves in a circle. Slowly, vines grew around them, accompanied by a shimmering, green dome. Arber had sealed the area off. Mercury felt the heat increase immediately as Asher tapped into faer fire.

Instantly, <Adaptable> worked to make his body more resistant to the temperature. It was a welcome change, and Mercury kept up for a little. Then, the air moved past where water would boil.

Gently, almost reverently, Mercury smiled. “Impressive, Asher.”

The fae gave a boisterous laugh. "Saikakakaka! Are you sure you wish to keep this battle going? I might turn you to ash, esteemed guest!"

Mercury's smile remained on his face. With a nudge of his mind, his waking ystir sunk into ihn'ar. The world shimmered gold with the first veil, and he broke through it. He left the veil of iridescence in place, though. He simply needed to see beyond reason, not beyond reality.

Then, as if handling an old friend, he reached out to <Rainfall>. Like a hug on a reunion, the ability hummed into full effect. Stormy winds rose around Mercury, fanning the flames that sprouted on the floor for a moment. Then, those flames were ripped apart by the roaring torrent.

Droplets began to coalesce around him, and whenever a flame threatened to pierce the wind, they would burst into mist around the fire, extinguishing it a moment later.

Asher's laughter dropped off. "What is this?" he asked, voice suddenly full of frustration. "Why aren't my flames reaching you?"

Mercury's smile stayed just as plain as it had been, though to Asher it must've had a cruel glint. "Why, can't you see, Asher? There is rain falling around me. I thought it was rather self-explanatory."

The fae's eyes widened. "*That* is your <Rainfall>?"

"Boy, you haven't seen the half of it. Go on, fae. Show me *fire*," he spurned the youth on.

Instantly, Asher laughed, the sound morphing into a roar halfway through. An inferno crashed into the arena. Blazing heat tore at the barrier, the wind raging and rushing. Mercury would have had trouble breathing - but he didn't. Instead, he stood calmly, his own gentle breeze billowing his cape and tearing the flames apart.

Tapping deeper into ihn'ar, Mercury made a request. "Expand," he asked from his <Rainfall>, and the ability replied. Slowly, only a centimeter at a time, the sphere around him grew. Bit by bit, it consumed more flame. Bit by bit, the rain grew stronger.

From a light drizzle, into a proper bit of rain, and eventually into a horrific storm. Droplet after droplet impacted the fire, spread out into mist, and consumed a large chunk of the heat.

In the center of it all, Mercury smiled. Asher had released a flaming tornado, and Mercury... remained untouched. It was wonderful.

Slowly, carefully, he took a step forward. The ground was slightly muddy from his rain where he stepped, though the mud seemed to be blown away by the wind of <Rainfall> rather than staining his fur.

Less than a minute later, he stood in front of Asher. The young fae stared at him, bewildered. Mercury spoke. "You know, if I take another step forward, my <Rainfall> might consume you like it did that fire."

At that, the muscular fae took a step back. If he'd had eyes, they would've gone wide.

“Step out of the arena, boy, before I really hurt you,” Mercury said. He would’ve patted the fae on the shoulder, but he was shrouded in an aura of destroying rain, and also about a quarter of the fae’s height.

Asher seemed stunned for a few moments. Then, Mercury took a half step forward, and a single droplet landed on the fae’s foot. It effortlessly carved its way through. Then, a moment later, Asher stood outside the arena.

“What a monster,” he said reverently.

“Do not call me that,” Mercury hissed. Then, he smiled, slightly. “That’s not what you would call... a friend, is it?”

The fae was stunned. “No...” his voice rang out. “No, I suppose it wouldn’t.”

“So it seems,” Mercury said.

“I... admire your passion,” the fae reluctantly agreed. “It’s why I wished to have it.”

“It would appear that my passion might just eat you up if you tried,” Mercury said with a wink. He believed it, partially, too. Well, he didn’t take himself for the most passionate person. But he was able to find joy in most things, and finding those little joys was something he was passionate about.

Asher simply nodded, still a little stunned. Mercury decided to give him a break, instead focusing on his next opponent. The shadow snake veilwatcher stood somewhere more distant. Brooding off in a corner, or something, surely.

It didn’t seem ready to face him yet, so Mercury decided to look at the arenas. One of the circles drew his attention. Lady Whisperblossom and lady Witness had just stepped inside. Then, there was a flash of colour, then both fairies stepped out.

Their bodies were torn, covered in bits of decay and frost. Witness had lost most her arms, Whisperblossom had her hat and half of her torso blown away. Apparently there was a brutal fight. Neither of them looked happy, either, so it must’ve been a draw or something.

Mercury watched as their shells regrew the missing pieces slowly.

A dozen more matches went over like that, until Mercury saw the shadow snake gesture at him, and walk into a circle. He followed a moment later, though Arber followed. They had discussed this. Arber would help. It would also be of assistance to Mercury’s little trick for this match.

“In order to compare your imagination, I will be giving both of you the ability to manifest things using my light, is this acceptable?” Arber asked.

“Certainly,” Mercury agreed.

“Acceptable,” the shadow hissed.

By now, the snake-like head was swaying, side to side, watching Mercury with those empty eyes. What did they see, he wondered? Maybe he would show them something pretty.

Recalling things from his dreamscape - which was *clearly* part of his imagination - he conjured up things from the light. A citadel of glass, tall spires, wonderfully shining walls, the sunlight reflecting and refracting off it. A spectacular piece.

The snake retorted, fashioning ribbons of shadow, interweaving into birds soaring through a dark sky in a box within a thought. It was a strange sort of construction that seemed to stretch the limits of what light could do. Very well.

Mercury simply built on his own construction. He added a patchwork sky, he added the sunset in different directions. He added stars, each as alive and wonderful as Whisperkid themselves. It was a miraculous scene.

His opponent grew more taut, flicking a forked, shadowy tongue through the air. Tasting his limits? Perhaps. The snake's art changed, becoming more complex, entering a cycle of shifting. The birds became an eye, then the eye a star, the star a sun over verdant fields, then the crop became people in a city, and so on and so forth.

It was lovely. Magnificent, even. Mercury smiled. He drew on <Manifestation> just a little, calling down a hint of his dreamscape, but using Arber's light to manifest it. Suddenly, his piece grew a thousand times more complex, and much wider. Verdant grass, stretching into infinity.

But it was boring to only reconstruct, so he changed it. Instead of the usual population, that included simply him and Uunrahzil, he decided to keep the latter secret. Rather than that, he imagined something else. A scene from his old life, blended with his new one.

Mercury took his brother. His niece, his sister in law, and his uncle, he took them all, structured their mana veins, then added his true sight on top of it. Their auras. Their bodies built from constellations. Swirling galaxies around a framework of magical rock.

That stunned the snake for a moment. It hesitated, then rose to the challenge. Its domain of shadow expanded, displaying a stunning mastery over the evershifting element. With every passing second, the heir of Shadow conjured more and more un-light, creating and changing it every moment, as though a music video was playing out.

All of it was impressive, yet, at the same time, it was time for Mercury to end it.

His image had been largely static, but that was not all he could do. Imagination was simply a mosaic of things we enjoyed. Mercury had seen far more than a handful of people.

The grass in his mindscape became populated, and more buildings rose, dozens at a time. He imagined a sprawling city, with the type of ecological architecture he always liked. Trees and plants interwoven with glass and steel behemoths. Thousands of people, each constructed like his dearest family populated the not-roads, where he left his grass to grow.

Soon, it began to rain. The sun in the patchwork sky refracted through the drops, shining down in a rainbow, that was different from each person's perspective. He had woken up both his other ystirs for a moment to conjure up the scene, but it was truly stunning.

Old Uunrahzil would have loved it.

"I concede," the shadow serpent hissed. "You may take my perspective, esteemed guest. See it and suffocate in the knowledge of Kilorak, the voidbreaker."

Ah, the snake was arrogant. Maybe he misstepped? What a blun-

Mercury couldn't finish the thought, as suddenly, the dome collapsed around him, and a new way to see the world slammed into his mind like a sledgehammer.