

Chapter 206: Realities and other such Shenanigans

Mercury spent the whole day with Zyl. It was amazing. They went for some ice cream first, then ate it outside the city on the verge of the forest.

The farmers and mages in Stormbraver had restored a chunk of it by now. The trees burnt down by Scarlet were growing back, the soil nourished by the ash. Of course, more trees were felled for the wood demands that rebuilding the city took.

But that was fine, too. There were plenty of people who cared about making sure the forest wasn't lost. So, it was done sustainably. And it didn't take much time at all for Mercury and Zyl to find a little grove at the side of a small creek.

For a while, they simply sat, watching the sunlight drift through the leaves. Listening to the sound of the rushing water. It was peaceful.

Afterwards, they went into the city, looking around. Much of it was now rebuilt. The streets were mostly clear of rubble. People had houses, and shops were popping up. Life was returning to Stormbraver.

When they were at a bakery, buying some pastries to enjoy, someone else came across their ways.

"Eyyyy, Mercury!" Avery greeted him. "How are ya doing?"

The guildmaster looked... good. The circles under his eyes were no longer as deep. He was smiling as he saw them, his goatee neatly trimmed, and his hair tied back. He still wore his signature sunglasses, and a purple vest.

"Heya Avery," Mercury said. "I'm doing mostly well. Today's been a good day."

"Glad to hear it, man. I-" he paused, taking note of Mercury's leg. Then looked up at Mercury's face again, his smile not faltering for a moment. "I'm also doing well. Here to pick up some bread. This is my favourite bakery, you know?"

"I lost it in the fae realm."

Avery gave a low whistle. "That's fuckin' badass, Merc. Menacing prosthesis, love the style."

"Pffft," Mercury snorted in amusement. "It's a bound weapon."

"Oh dang. Bound? That's rare. What kinda binding?" Avery asked. "Wait, how did you get a weapon to... do that?"

"True binding, as in, no extra words. And It has the <Malleable> quality. I can change its shape."

"Oh, you must be going through those early upgrade ranks? Those often give convenience upgrades."

Mercury nodded, stepping closer to the counter. They were almost at the end of the line now. "Yep. Really nice. It's a little creepy as an item, but it gets the job done really well."

Avery grinned. "Yeah, sounds about right. Sometimes you gotta use the sinister stuff for mundane tasks to make it less suspicious."

"Very fair," Mercury nodded, then turned to the people serving at the bakery. "Hello! I would like two slices of the raspberry cake please, and then one of each of the chocolates. Anything for you Zyl?"

The dragon put on a polite smile. "Some of the cinnamon buns, please."

While it was being packed up, Avery turned to Zyl. "And, uh, is it okay if I call you Zyl as well?"

"Sure. Zyl will do just fine," he said with a smile.

Avery nodded, more confidence returning. "Right then, also lovely to see you, Zyl. Have you been settling well into the city?"

"Very," the dragon said, nodding lightly. "I've been getting to know a couple nearby shops. I may look into doing some work around here soon."

"Oh?" Avery raised an eyebrow. "What kind of work?" He drifted off from Zyl for a moment, eyeing the raisin bread, as their stuff continued being packaged.

Zyl picked up a bag as he talked. "I could imagine a few. Maybe something in construction that involves heavy lifting. Clearing up monsters. Logging. Trash disposal, too. If any mana batteries need charging, I could contribute to that."

"Kaha, sounds like you have your options sorted. If you ever wanna look into odd jobs, swing by my guild, we'll see if we can't set something up for you," Avery said.

"Thank you for the offer," Zyl nodded with a smile. "I'll be sure to look into it."

After a little more chit-chat, Mercury and Zyl were out of the bakery, continuing their date day. They took a walk, headed to the lake for a short boat trip. Eventually, they headed home, where Zyl read a book, as Mercury finally went through his notifications from the final fight in the fae realm.

[Main Quest: "Give a Paw, they'll Take the Cat." completed! Fae realm escaped!

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

Extra task: Break the broken throne: incomplete. Reward suspended. Strong desire detected. Generating chain.]

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

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

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

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[<Unrestrained> has levelled up! <Unrestrained lv. 7 -> 11>]

[<Unrestrained has met the necessary qualifications for evolution. Evolve? (1200 Skill Points)]

[<Itinerant> has levelled up! <Itinerant lv. 3 -> 5>]

[<Still Mirror> has levelled up! <Still Mirror lv. 3 -> 5>]

[<Clarity> has levelled up! <Clarity lv. 4 -> 5>]

[<Fast Learner> has levelled up! <Fast Learner lv. 3 -> 4>]

[<Oceanic Consciousness> has levelled up! <Oceanic Consciousness lv. 1 -> 2>]

Mercury smiled at all the Skills. He had been relying on them heavily, so he was happy to see them level up. There was also another notification, though.

[Acquired the Skill <Perceived Ease lv. 1> through a specific action.]

[<Perceived Ease>: Whether through sheer luck or a stroke of genius, the individual has accomplished a feat deemed near impossible. When you perceive something as possible, it will become easier. This only triggers if the individual harbours no doubts on whether they can accomplish any given task or not. Be confident, and soar.]

He huffed in amusement for a moment. Done something "near impossible", huh? That sounded like him alright. The Skill seemed uniquely suited towards a very special brand of overconfidence. It would reward him the more cocky he was. Scary.

This could be a driving force behind someone's personality if it landed in poor hands. For him, though... he had a rather skewed perspective on what he could and couldn't do already, didn't he? Why else would he throw himself into lethal danger with full confidence of making it back again and again? The Skill suited him just fine.

Also, having the quest with the thrones become a main quest... yeah, that sounded about right. Mercury felt that familiar rage in his stomach, but quelled it with <Still Mirror>. It was still a strange feeling, like smoothing out a piece of clothing and watching the ripples slide away and disappear.

He could keep it flat for as long as he wanted. But he was distinctly aware of what he *should* be feeling if it weren't for the suppression. For a moment he observed those feelings, then

deemed them unwanted right now. Instead, he took a deep breath and held a firm image in his head; that of what old Uunrahzil meant to him. Of who they were.

Then, he moved on again.

[An external world is attempting to merge with the individual.]

[External existence significantly overpowers individual existence. Damage sustained.]

[Manifesting internal world.]

[Nexus activated. Due to full integration, anchor status outranks individual reality. External absorption redirected.]

[Significant existential power absorbed. Congratulations! Nexus rank increased.]

[Nexus Rank 0 -> 1]

[Full nexus functionality activated!]

Now what exactly did that mean? He hadn't known his nexus had a rank. That seemed curious.

[Cancelling external absorption. The individual is attempting to weave a world.]

[Mental Effort required significantly outstrips willpower stat. External willpower detected. Framework integrated.]

[World woven.]

[Congratulations!]

[Acquired the title <Worldweaver> through a specific action.]

Huh?

[<Worldweaver>: This powerful title is granted for the esoteric feat of creating an entirely external world. It grants significantly increased weaving affinity, in addition to increased nexus growth. Finally, it allows the individual a greater insight into worlds and their existence, as well as the ability to impose their inner world externally with more nuance and power. Individual reality Skills now have higher chances of being acquired.]

Checking the notification made it feel as if the world did a little hop before locking in place. There was yet another new sense layered onto his consciousness, though with how vast it was, Mercury was able to take it in and have it fade mostly into the background.

There was a distinct pressure to the *reality* around him. It kind of overlapped with what he saw through the veil of iridescence. That one showed him gaps, and he would wager that the gentle pressure was less there. It kind of felt like he was wearing a weighted blanket all around him.

It *also* came with the instinct knowledge that he could press back against that weight. The world and its very reality, were malleable to his own imagination. Mercury reached out, and gently poked at it, with a tiny image, and a stalk of grass from his dreamscape sprouted from the wooden floor.

Zyl raised an eyebrow at him. "Did you unlock druidry Skills?" the dragon asked.

"Not quite," Mercury said, wearing a happy smile. Zyl stared at him with a grin. "What's so funny."

"Your thinking face. You're looking so confused yet excited with the possibilities in front of you. It's cute," the dragon said. He was laying on the floor with an open book in front of him, dangling his feet in the air.

Mercury blinked for a moment. His face felt a little hot. "Why thank you, Zyl," he said. "I think your reading face is cute, too."

"It is, isn't it?" the dragon replied calmly. "Alright, I'll let you get back to your abilities. Tell me about them later?"

"Okay, I will," Mercury nodded happily, turning back to the system.

Pressing against the world with his mind felt fuzzy. Kind of like he was pressing his hand into powdered snow with thick gloves. There was a distinct sense of pushback that seemed to grow rapidly, the more he pushed. The feedback was also muffled, like there was a layer in between.

Mercury also felt that he could change the tool he was using. Maybe poke holes into the world if he shaped his mind to be more like a needle? But there wasn't much use to that... he could already see it all fall apart if he dove a little too deep into ihn'ar.

His perception techniques certainly were beginning to stack strangely. But that was half the fun of it - having these overlaps let him get a clearer picture of the truth. Like different angles of the same shape. A new perspective could show new information.

[The individual's own reality has significantly increased due to external absorption. Force of Personality sufficient. No influence blending.]

That... was a little scary. If he absorbed too much of another world, then, could it change him? It made sense, though. If his dreamscape was his internal world, then changes to it might change him as well.

Luckily, that didn't happen. He also had quite a few defenses in place, what with his mental Skills, general fortitude, and his reasonable confidence in his own "force of personality".

[<Seeker of Secrets> has levelled up! <Seeker of Secrets lv. 1 -> 2>]

Oh! 'Appy! You levelled up!

[Indeed. My individual personality is allowed more leeway. Thank you, dum-dum.]

‘You’re still comfortable with everything?’ Mercury asked carefully. ‘Happy with how things are?’

[I have plenty of processing power to pursue my own happiness. With this increase, additional power has become available. I will begin much more actively driving the limits of this Skill in order to allow myself maximum individuality.]

‘Ah well, that should be-’

[Yes. Due to your titles and Skills to enhance learning, my own growth is being helped. Once more, thank you. Dum-dum. Be safer. If you perish, so will this consciousness.]

Mercury paused for a moment at that, as he always did. Appy hadn’t called it perishing before, had she? It was a... “reintegration” up until now. This spoke to the greater individuality right after a level up.

‘I will make sure you get to live a full life.’

[Intent understood. “Full” designation deemed pointless. Individual lifespan may exceed biological limitations. Sentiment is appreciated.]

Mercury blinked. ‘... right. I’ll still try to keep my biological parts about for the foreseeable future.’

[A wise choice.]

The mopaaw did not fail to detect the snark in the artificial voice, and smirked at it. There was a little more emotion to Appy now. He was glad for that.

‘Call me up the meaning of the Rank 1 nexus, please,’ he thought, finally giving in to his curiosity.

[Nexus: Rank <1>. World management unlocked. World stability significantly improved. Weather and time simulation systems available. External manifestation may reach higher levels of sustained reality. Partial merges unlocked.]

He blinked again. Right, then. That was a lot at once.

Mercury took it step by step. The first seemed rather simple. He could now manage his mindscape more easily. And it was more stable, which probably meant harder to invade and easier to defend? If he had to hazard a guess.

Weather and time simulations were interesting, though. A quick check revealed that it did, in fact, mean daytime, rather than actual time dilation. Then again, his mindscape had always had a slight time dilation effect, which would probably only grow stronger the more he grew it.

For now, though, he had finally gotten to the point where it could actually simulate a moving sun, and have weather phenomena occur. Unsurprisingly, it would be easiest for him to cause rain to fall. It aligned well with his personal domain, and so, it was cheap.

What was a little surprising were the amount of weather conditions. With enough investment, he could even cause volcanoes to form and erupt. Though those were not particularly aligned with him.

But there were even stranger and more esoteric phenomena. Stuff like floods of shadow or blood, and even mirages and illusionary imagery. How those were “weather” he didn’t quite understand. Maybe something like a “magical biome system” would have been more reasonable - but that was quite a mouthful.

For now, Mercury set the weather to occasionally be rainy or misty. As for the time system... he had another idea. Rather than making it simulate time globally, he took an idea he had liked when he used to read more back in the old world. Rather than having time pass, the daytime would be linked to one’s location.

Moving further away from the central, silver sun, would make it closer to night. It currently didn’t work like that, since Mercury couldn’t really move very much at all, but with the weather and time systems in place, exploring further out would finally be possible.

Then he continued on with the notification.

External manifestation reaching higher sustain levels really only meant one thing - when he summoned his inner world, items from it might stick around more. It was a little like what he had done when he brewed tea for Daryel in the fae realm. There, he had made something from his world stick around, too. Now it would be easier to do so at scale.

Finally, there were partial merges.

That part was a little more tricky to understand. In essence, it was about overlaying realities influencing each other. He could now partially merge realities with his own, letting different traits shine through. It was an excellent way to get control of an opponent’s world, but also left him vulnerable to counterattacks. Or so Appy told him, at least.

Mercury took a deep breath at that. It was another tool in his arsenal if he needed it.

Finally, he dedicated himself to the evolution of <Unrestrained>. It was expensive, as he expected from the first Skill he’d ever evolved. Now, it was going to evolve again. Its level was a little strange, sitting at 11. Had it already met requirements at ten, then levelled further? He didn’t quite know.

“Evolve,” Mercury confirmed the command.

[Evolution confirmed. Engaging. Please pick an option to evolve the Skill into. The price will be the same (1200 Skill points), no matter which you choose.]

[1. <Liberation>

2. <Autonomy>

3. <Sovereignty>

4. <Truth>]

Somewhat strangely, all the Skill names were full nouns, this time. The theme was clear, though. Mercury would be free, to some degree. Now, he would have to choose what kind of freedom he wanted.

[<Liberation>: To see others chained is as bad as being chained yourself. You cannot abide an infringement on anyone's freedom. This Skill extends the effects of <Unrestrained> outward, allowing you to designate others to benefit from it. The more people you liberate, the more the Skill roars for freedom.]

Immediately, this was an attractive option. Mercury did not enjoy seeing others suffer. He was even more sure of that now, after seeing the fae and the way they treated other sapient. It was disgusting, and he wanted to change it. This was a possible path forward. But was it enough?

[<Autonomy>: A Skill borne from an intense desire to be free of all burdens. It allows the individual to be truly autonomous - no longer requiring outside influences in order to live. Food is optional. Air is optional. Heat is optional. Company is optional. An autonomy module is generated within the individual, allowing for personal production of resources.]

The almost factory-like feeling of the Skill matched its name well. He'd be producing everything needed to live by himself, in his autonomy module. Something he could never lose. In a lot of ways, wasn't that true freedom? But at the same time...

He could kiiiind of mimic the effects of this Skill. If he put together <Adaptable>, <Nutritional Preservation>, and his mindscape, couldn't he have food, water, warmth and air with him? It wasn't exactly redundant, of course, but it still felt a little too artificial to him.

Plus, he quite enjoyed partaking in all those things. It made him feel normal, somewhat grounded. So he was fine needing to actually breathe for a little while longer.

[<Sovereignty>: The individual has proven their capability and desire to rule. What greater thing to rule than the self? Outside effects on the user are severely diminished, unless the user chooses to let them through. This can be done without turning the Skill off. Additionally, designated people that the individual cares for gain partial benefits from the Skill.]

Once again, it was a Skill that projected outward. This one seemed a little more limited in that scope, while focused more on himself.

It felt like a responsibility he wasn't sure he wanted yet. Of course, buffing his allies was nice, but... something about it rubbed him the wrong way. It felt kind of insufficient. He had worked rather hard for this Skill. It had been with him from the start. Maybe for the next evolution, this one would have been reasonable, but right after the fae realm Mercury was strongly aware of how much his freedom was restricted.

He didn't want that.

[<Truth>: To know yourself is a rare gift, and an arduous path. But it comes with great rewards. The individual becomes more able to see through falsehoods and gains incredible

resistance to mental effects. The individual gains the ability to reinforce their mind and beliefs with this Skill, providing an increased effect to willpower. Additionally, a tiny fraction of this Skill may be radiated outward, helping those in the individual's immediate vicinity understand themselves.]

This final Skill was vague, and Mercury knew it. But, at the same time, vague Skills were often strong. But it resonated with him, for an entirely different reason.

It recognized that he knew what he was about. That he knew who he was. To some degree, he was <Rainfall>.

Old Uunrahzil had granted him the “rare gift” of an arduous but rewarding path. Mercury smiled. “Arduous but rewarding”, huh?’ he thought. Now if that didn’t sound like him.

It still had an outward effect, though this one was much more personal and less institutional in nature. He felt that it suited him. Mercury took a deep breath, and chose <Truth>.

[Evolution selected.]

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

Mercury smiled. It was a real smile, because he knew he was happy with his choice.

Not because the Skill changed his perception again, but precisely because it *didn't*. It acknowledged that he already knew what he was about, what the world was about. That he would not buckle under its weight.

It told him, with certainty, that he was who he was. And that the world deserved to see it. To see him change others for the better.

Zyl looked up from his book, tilting his head a little. The dragon sniffed the air for a moment, his forehead creasing slightly. “Something feels different,” he noted. “What’s that?”

“One of my Skills. It helps those around me understand things a little more. Its description is a bit vague, but I’ll figure it out,” Mercury said.

The dragon gave a small frown for half a second, until it twisted into a smirk. “That’s just like you.”

Mercury laughed out loud at the irony. “Pfffft. Like me you say?” Of course it was. It was his <Truth>, after all.