

Chapter 181: Practice makes Perfect

“Mercury.”

Only half a page had passed. Mercury had spent his days learning a small routine for once. It mostly consisted of consistent mornings, followed by learning more smithing from Yasashiku. <Elementary Crafting> had levelled up twice more, reaching level 8.

It was a quiet voice that called out to him. Of an old friend. Mercury smiled. “Juno,” he said, turning to the wolf. “You made it.”

There she stood. A grey wolf, slim and with smooth, if slightly dirty fur. Her eyes were intelligent, sparkling a little, and of a greyish-blue. The haze around her was nebulous, like grey fog. She smiled. “We made it, Mercury.”

With a casual ease that came from days of practice, Mercury relaxed his mind, no longer holding his rijin in the shape of a hammer. With his new Skill he could technically wield a hammer, but he was more used to smithing using his rijin these days, and so he used that instead. <Force of the Hecatoncheires> was still more than useful for rearranging things, though, and he used it constantly.

He hopped off the slightly elevated platform that doubled as an outdoor workshop, stepping near Juno. The two got close, and a smirk found its way to Mercury’s face. He was only a little smaller than the wolf.

With a smile, he nuzzled against her side, and she returned the favour. Her fur felt soft.

“I’m glad you’re back, Juno.”

“So am I.”

The moment lasted for a dozen seconds, before the buzz of everyday life all around them brought them back to the present. Juno was, at the end of the day, still a wolf, which got her quite a few strange looks from the passers-by.

“Did they take you for a true kin at the gates as well?” Mercury asked.

“They did,” Juno nodded. “I think it helps that there is already another talking animal in town.”

Mercury chuckled and exaggeratedly rolled his eyes. “Humans, eh?”

He paused for a moment, thinking. Huh. He... wasn’t human anymore at all. As in, he had been a mopaaw for a while now, of course, but it hadn’t really quite clicked. But now? After those last few messages?

By now, he could literally survive without a physical body. He didn’t need his heart to live anymore. He didn’t need a brain to think. How... strange.

Juno, though, didn't quite catch those thoughts, and instead just chuckled, her tail whipping through the air for a moment. "Yeah. Humans."

Silence hung in the air for a while. Both of them had the same thought. Juno, though, vocalized it. "I miss Cherry."

Mercury's smile faded from his lips. They turned into a thin line instead. "Yeah," he said, unable to find more words. Cherry was... another person he promised the whole world, then got her killed.

Feeling the awkward silence, Juno tapped him with her snout. "Sorry. Shouldn't have brought it up."

"No, it's... it's okay," Mercury said. He held back a grimace, barely successful. He breathed out, hard. "I don't think I've quite grieved enough."

Juno gave a sad kind of smile. "Have we ever?"

Mercury shook his head. "No, I suppose that's not quite how it works. But it's the middle of the day, I can move the whole grieving part to the evening," he said, getting a small chuckle from Juno. "I think we're only missing Larash now, everyone else's already here."

"Really now? What are Ruvah and Jirluc up to?"

"Ruvah is working in the fields, learning some gardening. Jirluc is hunting, because of course he is," Mercury said.

Juno barked a laugh. "Hah! Yes. Of course he is. Gardening, though. It suits Ruvah."

Mercury smiled. "Doesn't it? I'm working on some smithing myself these days."

"Really now?" Juno's tail waved through the air again.

"Yes, even found myself a good teacher. Learning how to create things. I want to be able to use more runecarving and such." Juno nodded along. "But that's enough about me. What do you want to do, Juno?"

At that, her tail froze for a moment. She looked unsure. "Well..." her voice trailed off. "I would like to keep you safe."

"Heh, don't worry, I'm perfectly safe."

"He nearly bled out again half a page ago," Yasashiku said, leaning against the doorframe, his arms crossed.

Juno blinked, staring at Mercury, whose smile suddenly became a lot more sheepish. "Really now?" she asked.

"Well, that one was more my own fault to be fair..."

Rolling her eyes, Juno turned to Yasashiku. "He maintained the habit of working himself half to death?"

The old man with a crow's mask nodded. "Makes him a quick study, at least as long as he can *not* get himself knocked ever couple days."

Juno nodded along, understanding entirely. "Right, then. I would like to protect you, Mercury. Travel with you again, too, if or when we move on from here."

"Alright, alright, you're free to make your own choices, Juno." He paused. "This is your own choice, right?"

She smirked. "Yes. Your Skill isn't changing me. I could break the connection whenever I felt like it. I am keeping that connection up because I *want to*. I can even change things about the Skill, slightly. Otherwise, that experience pool it comes with would have had a lot more stored up."

Mercury double checked, and yes. She was right. Any experience that used to be in the shared pool was gone. Juno had taken it all, and probably needed it to survive.

"Huh," he said.

"Anyway," she said, brushing it off. "I want to make sure you're safe."

"Yes, yes, alright, I got that," Mercury said. "Sure. You can be my guard, or something, right? Is that what you want?"

"Yes, my liege," Juno said.

"None of that, though! Not your liege! Let's... let's not do that, for now, okay?" he said.

Juno smirked. "Sure, sure."

And so, Mercury got another guard.

That evening, Juno did also move in with Zyl and him. She got a bed in the guest room, which they bought from Foss.

And more time passed.

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After another three days, Larash made it to Stormbraver. Mercury met up with her, and they talked for a little while.

She'd come up from far down south. Her home, the place she reappeared after the blood eclipse, was under the sands. So she'd had to dig her way out of those, first.

It used to not be under the sands, of course, but the dunes wandered over time. But she made it out, and after a very long, very unpleasant trip through the desert, then a bit of prairie and grassland and some forests, she finally made it all the way to Stormbraver.

“Think I’ll stay here, too,” she said. “Sands hold too many bad memories. I’ll see if I can’t build myself a house.”

And then she did exactly that. Made herself a house in town, buying the property on a loan to be paid off with labour. Mercury vouched for her, of course, and that was enough for Foss to lend some coin.

She built Jirluc a house as well, halfway underwater at the lakeside. He wanted it that way. Sleeping underwater was something he was slowly getting used to again, and though it was a rather big change of pace from his last few years, it also felt much more refreshing for him than sleeping on land.

Ruvah didn’t exactly need very much at all. They also slept near the lake, in a small metal bathtub Yasashiku had made for them.

And then, Mercury ended up wondering about his Main Quest.

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[Main Quest: “The rumours of my death have been greatly exaggerated.”

Condition: Inform those who thought you’d died of your life. Meet those who you wish to see, and make good on your obligations.

Reward: <Still Mirror> mastery, 500 Skill points.]

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Who else thought he’d died? He had visited Kintra, everyone in Stormbraver by now, Yasashiku... maybe he still needed to see Alexander and Marsh? But... they knew he was alive by now.

Then again, given the wording of the Quest, it could very well mean that he needed to be the one to tell them in person. In which case, yeah, he still needed to visit old man Alex and Marsh.

But it could wait, for now.

For the first time in forever, Mercury felt like he had a little more time. Well, not really that, either. It felt like he wasn’t staring down a clock, finally. Like he could take each day as they came, rather than constantly running forward on a treadmill.

After having stared down his old memories and nightmares and frigging dragons... everything seemed a lot smaller. The world was a big place, and he didn’t doubt there were things in it he rightfully should be afraid of, but then again, most people should probably be afraid of existences like the Caretaker.

Who he casually chatted with. So there was that.

Breeze was probably another example of that, and old Uunrahzil, too. Mercury smirked to himself. He really did kind of have a habit of talking to things way out of his league. Well, there wasn't really any gap that couldn't be breached with proper communication, especially when both sides tried to make things work.

With his newfound calm, Mercury, for once, didn't try and seek out trouble, like he so often did. He waited for trouble to find him, like it always would, no doubt. But until then, he could just wait it out.

Well. He did still want to resurrect Gladiator and Second and Cherry. But at the same time, he didn't exactly have much of an idea on how he would go about it. So in terms of that, he'd have to wait until Tesla came up with a solution.

So, day after day, Mercury threw himself at blacksmithing.

He had grown quite adept at using his Skills to mold metal. He would move and lift things with his newly gained arms, as well as use them to hold things in place. He liberally used <Sever>, too, trimming away excess material.

His main tool, though, was his rijn. Mercury used both of them like hammers, dealing blows to the metal and shaping it rather quickly, then evenly turning it with his many hands. Every day, his nails became a little more perfect.

Another two pages passed, and by then, Mercury had gotten <Elementary Crafting> up to <Apprentice Crafting lv. 2>. This was, according to Yasashiku, the point at which the Skill would actually start showing more than just a vague improvement to the things you crafted.

Mercury understood what he meant when he made his first nail with the evolved Skill. He could suddenly tell where he needed to hit the nail. He knew where the metal was weak, and how he needed to strike to rectify those issues.

It even seemed to make shaping the metal easier. Maybe this was part of what Yasashiku used to move tons of stone with a single hammerstrike, but then he needed a much higher level Skill. Which he obviously had. So yes, maybe that was actually it.

There was probably at least a little more to it, but this was as good a point as any for Mercury to start at. So he continued practicing. By now, altogether he had actually been learning from Yasashiku for quite a while.

The old man still occasionally came out and advised him on how to best get the iron out of the ore, and from the oven, how to have it cool or quench it or temper it, and so on. It was a long process, but he was picking up a lot of things a lot faster than he had ever been able to as a human.

Whenever something took him a bit longer, a quick use of <Clarity> or sometimes <Revelation> could also help clear things up. He tried to use the latter sparingly, though, since his many arms consumed quite a lot of mana.

Which was yet another thing he worked on. During the night, he absorbed more mana again, both to train up his ystirs, but also to just have more of the resource available for when he needed it.

Knowing that his max Hp would be higher than his Mp if it weren't for the earrings he got from Irrithuriel was honestly a little upsetting, so he grew his pool more, bit by bit. By now it had gone from a tiny puddle in his core to something he could actually consider a pool, too.

And he enjoyed the calm.

Ruvah, though, took to her new life a lot better. Mercury saw her occasionally, out in the fields. Getting started had taken an initial investment of Skill points, yes, but she had gained a few levels from making it out of the ashen plains, so parting with a couple points wasn't a big deal.

Now, she was able to spend mana and stamina to make water that let crops flourish better. To enrich the soil with nutrients, to supercharge photosynthesis, all kinds of things. She could have picked a form to better fit in with the farmers, but she chose to stick with mirroring Mercury's shape.

Maybe she still felt indebted to him for the leeches? Probably, even. Or maybe that shape was just more comfortable for her than one with two legs. He hoped it was the latter.

Despite all the trouble they had been going through, Stormbraver was becoming a nicer city day by day.

The main streets were already clear of rubble, and almost all the side streets were as well. Buildings popped up left and right as people came back. Avery occasionally stopped by when he made the rounds, usually carrying bags of raisin bread. Mercury and Marcel often went to Gilah for the weekends, and occasionally Kaga would join them.

Elliot sometimes stopped by the workshop, just to talk to Mercury. Those conversations were usually rather one sided, since Elliot was happy just telling Mercury how their day had gone. Sometimes, when Elliot or Ruvah visited, Mercury could hear a small laugh in the wind, only if he focussed, though. Breeze seemed to take well to those two, though Mercury was unsure if that was a good sign.

And sometimes, on late nights, if Mercury slept too little, and didn't eat well, or overexerted himself, he would feel something different. Two things, really.

First was the fact that the world sometimes seemed to become less real again. When Mercury could feel his mind wander and dream about all the things that could be, and when reality seemed to burst at the seams, so he had to pull himself back together.

That was a consequence of him undoing the shackles on his mind. Usually, those kinds of existentially worrying thoughts stayed hidden behind the second veil of iridescence, and as long as he didn't delve too deep into ihn'ar, he didn't have to worry. But things still slipped through, and it was something he simply had to deal with.

Secondly, he felt watched. It was a strange sensation, really, because Mercury was starting to know when he was being looked at. It was a combination of his perception, his understanding of reality, the fact that he could sense through the mana all around him, and his <Intuition> that combined into something of a strange extrasensory experience.

He could tell when Breeze was watching because the wind would flow slightly differently. He knew when Zyl rounded a corner and started looking at him because his fur might turn warm. He could even tell when Yasashiku was coming out of the workshop, because it felt like a block of iron laid eyes on him.

But late at night, when no one else was there, Zyl and Juno already asleep, Mercury would wake up and know that something was watching him.

Were there Spells or Skills for that? Most likely, yes. But the look wasn't exactly one that felt familiar. He could probably tell if it had been someone he'd met, because most looks felt similar to the person they came from. This one felt foreign, though.

Sometimes he wondered who that might be, because it was certainly a strange feeling, and not something he wanted to brush off. But he didn't know. Zyl suggested it might be the gods, if those existed, but Mercury didn't really feel like that was true that much at all. The look didn't feel very divine, to him.

At the same time, though, it was something he would probably have to get used to.

"There's lots of people watching me a lot of the time," Zyl said, over breakfast. "Because when you're a person with a bit of power, people start to worry about you. Maybe it's just because you're adjacent to me?"

Mercury took a sip of his tea, then shook his head. "That doesn't sound right honestly. It feels like something that's after me, specifically."

"Could you imagine why something would be after you?"

"Not really," Mercury shook his head. "Well. Not for any more reasons than the usual. Do you think it's related to the blood eclipses?"

Zyl frowned. "I'd hope not. I really would prefer for us to be able to leave that behind."

"Yeah. Me too."

"Want me to get Macloy to take a look at it? She's better at checking for those kinds of influences than I am," Zyl suggested.

"Sure, yeah, we can do that," Mercury agreed. "No harm in it, right?"

Zyl smiled. "Exactly. She should probably be here in two pages. Maybe until then, it'll have already resolved itself, right?"

"... Yeah, sure. Maybe it will."

Mercury had the odd feeling that it would not be resolving itself.

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Despite the strange night terrors, Mercury continued on. He woke up in the morning, held the world together at its edges if he slept poorly, then went to practice blacksmithing.

Breeze visited him, like a sudden roaring quiet.

The metal in Mercury's hands cooled, and the air itself was frozen as winds whipped through Mercury's fur. Juno laid at his side, raising her head as she felt the chill. It was approaching Spring these days, no longer being in full winter, so the cold was unnatural, she knew that much.

Breeze looked at Mercury.

Mercury looked at Breeze.

Playful winds played at being harsh as the beat down on the street. Time felt frozen in an eternal moment, shared only between the three of them.

"Your companion snuck into here, Biso."

"I suppose she did," Mercury nodded. "Do you mind?"

Breeze cocked his head. "I suppose not."

Mercury smiled. "Anything you need?"

"I want to play with Elliot."

"But you're scared you're gonna break him?" Mercury asked.

Breeze nodded. "Yes. He seems like he would break easily. Most small people do."

Mercury chuckled. "Small people?"

Breeze rolled his eyes. "Children."

"Aren't you a kid?"

"No!" Breeze said, huffing, then stomping a foot on the ground. "I am not a kid!"

"Alright, alright. What are you then, an adult?"

"No, not that either. I'm just me!" Breeze said proudly.

"That's a fair point."

"I am very fair. The fairest," Breeze said. The winds around turned into an updraft, almost strong enough to start lifting Mercury off the floor. He summoned a little extra mass to keep himself grounded.

"Alright, Breeze. Have you considered that instead of playing with Elliot, you could try just talking?" Mercury asked.

Breeze cocked his head a little further, firmly planting himself in uncanny territory, bending in ways spines were not meant to bend. "Why?"

"Because talking is less dangerous. If you're nice to Elliot, he might come up with a game you can play without hurting each other."

"I wanna play catch."

"You're gonna hurt someone, Breeze."

The kid frowned. "So you fix them, Biso."

Mercury shook his head. "I can fix objects. Not people."

"What!" A sudden gust crashed down on Mercury, almost driving him flat onto his stomach. "But you said you were learning to fix things!"

"*People aren't things*," Mercury said, his voice heavy, and the wind quieted down. Breeze's face turned from anger to shock, and he took a step back.

"You're... Angry?" the storm asked, almost confused by the emotion at all.

"Yes."

"People only ever get angry when I break their things."

"Do you usually try talking to people?"

"... yeah..." Breeze lied.

"See Breeze," Mercury said, finding some small amusement in the pun, "when you say things that people disagree with, they sometimes can also get upset. Despite that, I'm still talking with you."

"Okay..."

"So, talk to people. They can forgive you for saying things more easily than doing things, you know?" Mercury suggested.

Breeze brightened a little, but still seemed a bit unhappy. That was fine. Sometimes kids needed to be a bit unhappy. "Alright, Biso," he said. Then he paused for a bit. "I'll try talking to Elliot."

"That's good, I'm proud of you for trying something new," Mercury said.

That brightened Breeze up a little more. "Okay. Then... You just make sure that the storm brewing around you isn't too much trouble, okay?" Breeze said.

"Huh?" Mercury said, wanting to ask more about that, but the kid had already disappeared with a puff of air. Mercury's fur settled back down. He sighed. "Whelp, Juno. Seems like we're gonna have some trouble on our hands soon."