

Chapter 247: Evolution part 4

Mercury faced a world of steel and flooded it with quicksilver.

Fire blossomed around him, radiant heat washing over the world. An ethereal, half-real citadel burning into the world, turning the metal soft and malleable. Mercury manifested a rijñ with each of his 4 zeyjn, creating hammers.

The world was steel, and it was forged.

Furious trees lashed out with swordlike iron branches to cut Mercury apart, only to be unmade into plates and nails. <Grief> mixed with the power of the Stifled Silence, weakening the metal, turning it weak. The fire softened it up even further. Then, <Magical Metallurgy> went into full effect and let him shape it as he wanted to.

Mercury stepped forward, and a half dozen furious, mindless monsters were turned into nothing but plates, hinges and nails of magical steel. When the creatures grew larger, from weasels into bears, rather than folding them into nails, he simply created bricks, condensing and wholesale flattening them.

<Sever> cut them into smaller, more manageable bits, and <Force of the Hecatoncheires> held everything in place to ensure he struck true. In the end, since the movements of his mind were invisible, the way it looked was simple.

Mercury walked across an ocean of shiny quicksilver, and wherever that circle of wondrous quiet touched the furious world, the world folded. It bent inwards, the anger beaten out of it in a few swift, invisible distortions, and cut apart into metal parts useful for building houses.

Steel trees were hammered down into plates. Leaves became nails. Claws turned into screws, and wings into hinges. A thousand wrathful abominations assaulted Mercury. Furious chimeric creatures of violent steel. They shimmered with the gleaming grey of metal, only to crumple in on themselves once they entered that sphere of heat and grief and calm, dissonant hammering.

All that sounded in that tiny ocean of liquid metal was the soft chiming of a hammer.

Hours drifted by with Mercury simply taking slow steps, hammering away at the world, and eventually, one of his minds grew weary. So, he left it to rest, smacking the realm with only three hammers. Those, still, were enough.

[<Multitasking> has levelled up! <Multitasking lv. 42 -> 43>]

Then he was down to two. Finally, a single one.

This was worse. His speed slowed. But, rather than worry, he simply laid down, placing his head on his paws, closing his eyes, and waiting. Fury rained down on him, the world seeking to twist who he was, but it all met his <Still Mirror> and was swallowed up. Mercury refused to let his <Truth> be one of anger.

Maybe this place demanded his fury, but that wrath was a lie, and he simply declined.

And so, somehow, most of Mercury slept in the place of wrath. He didn't scurry, didn't hide away, didn't creep into some crevasse and hope he wasn't found. A part of him, a little more than a quarter, simply stayed active and protected himself.

Rest came at a price in a place like this, of course, so his other three minds found themselves pulled, tethered to some kind of angry sun. It pulled and tore at him, until, with a soft sigh, he let a part of himself be carried off to its "hunting grounds".

This one didn't have nightstalkers and draining fog. The realm of sleep wasn't a horrible labyrinth. It was, instead, very simple.

A colosseum.

Every single soul ever devoured by this realm, forced onto a battleground of red sand, stained thick with blood and teeth and shards of bone. Millions of dead warriors, forced to fight forever. To die, over and over and over and over and over again.

Mercury found himself in the middle of a bloody battleground that was impossibly vast, and yet ringed by a sneering audience, demanding more. More blood, more pain, more suffering, more anger. To cut someone down who threatened to kill oneself. To fight the odds. To grip the blades of swords and kill and maim and hurt.

He took a deep breath, and let it all wash over him. He took the horrid anger this place wanted to instill in him, the way it made his mind try to pull itself apart, and he gently placed it on a river and let it go. Like a boat made from leaves, it travelled down the stream until it was out of sight.

Rain began to fall around Mercury in that second world.

Outside, he was wreathed in lazy, flowing, unstoppable quicksilver. In the dream, there was a patiently unyielding storm, hugging his shoulders as a cloak may. Drop after drop of wonderful rain fell, swallowing up the cries and the fury of the world. Wind blew their hatred away.

Those who laid dying, suffering in pools of their own blood, were washed away too. A million raindrops pierced them without resistance, and their mind found a tranquil peace, for a little while, until this place put their rotten vestiges back together to suffer again.

And that was all he could do for now.

In that dream, too, Mercury walked. Wherever he stepped, the rain washed over the sand, and some of the blood was washed away. Sloughing off and carried away by the rain, leaving the sand a quartz white. A rainstorm raged gently, and the world calmed.

Mercury walked, and walked, and walked.

And then, he sat down, too.

There were a lot of things Mercury was bad at. He couldn't hit very hard, really. Well, in reality, he could hit hard enough, but he couldn't explode entire mountains or anything outrageous like that. He couldn't split the seas, or move at the speed of light.

But what he was very, very good at... was being untouchable.

In the very middle of a hostile world, in the center of its hunting ground where his mind was being run ragged with fury and bloodshed, and the outside, where he was being drowned in an ocean of steel, Mercury sat. Then he closed his eyes.

[<Oceanic Consciousness> has levelled up! <Oceanic Consciousness lv. 6 -> 7>]

As amusing as it was to prove himself to this place, Mercury didn't want to do just that. There was, after all, a species evolution ready for him to trigger.

And it was a big one, too. He had gained a total of 100 levels now. Most Skills evolved at level ten, too, so surely there was something special about level 100. His last evolution had been unique, already, so he was excited to see what this one held.

With part of his mind hammering the metal world into shape, and another part cleansing the infinite colosseum, Mercury focussed, quietly, and spoke to Appy. "I'd like to trigger my species evolution."

[Congratulations! You have reached level 40, making you eligible for evolution. Your total levels reached are now 100. Your summary of experience, of joy, of desire, is considerable. The system **recognizes you**.]

[Mercury Rainfall Starlight. Summarizing. The individual has made friends, lost friends, killed, survived, fought and starved and thrived. The individual has learnt ancient forms of magic, has grasped the nature of things and related to them, has grown as a person, has acquired dozens of Skills through their own efforts and evolved them. They have unlocked, selected, and achieved thriving success with a new species and added it to the database for further eligible evolutions. You have usurped hills to entire realms, fragments of worlds. You have torn and you have mended the fabric of reality and the weave that holds it all together.]

[You have laughed. You have cried. You have found suffering and joy. You have desired.]

[You have lived.]

[Due to your lived experience, you have reached a total level of 100. This major milestone doubles the effect of all attributes.]

Holy shit.

[The individual has reached level 40. You are now eligible for evolution. All options are unique. Please choose one of the following:

Fyron:

One with flames, this creature no longer requires a physical form. Woven from threads of liquid fire, its body is malleable and near impossible to damage. You may reshape yourself from an ember or a pile of ash, and you grow a spark of flame within yourself, a budding star.

Ocyon:

Within this species, there is a lake. It is the deep and unending river of one's consciousness, unstoppable, unholdable. All disturbances may float on it and carry on, or be swallowed by the depths of the water. The world bends to your will, waves weaving webs of wily thought. Never ceasing, an existence that simply washes over anything trying to impede its everlasting march.

Wryon:

It knows. That is at the heart of the wryon - it knows. There are secrets, and you will find them. There are truths, and, truthfully, they are yours already. When you ask, threads come undone, ideas unveil themselves, and enlightenment follows in your wake. You may ask, and with your question, there will, inevitably, be an answer.]

Mercury took a long breath. Those were who he was. In a very real way, these three choices were the culmination of what the system thought he was worthy of. But...

He smiled. All of these held little hints for him to follow through on. Very slowly, he breathed in, then out.

"Hey, System? I'd like to make a <Bet>."

Instantly, the world fell a little more quiet. After all, this was the culmination of who he was as a person. And yet, he was going to see about getting more?

"I would like to wager that I'll find a fourth option," he said, calmly.

For a short moment, silence.

"If I find it, I would like to ask for an additional upgrade for it. If not, you can strike the wryon off the current list."

[Accepted.]

The weight of the wager settled on his shoulders. Mercury breathed and accepted it. And, despite it all, he smiled. Because, for his next magic trick, he was going to exploit a few details about his current build.

There were two centerpieces to this little trick of his. One was <Seeker Of Secrets>, his good friend Appy. The second piece was <Truth>, his most evolved Skill. And, of course, a whole lot of supplementary pieces.

See, the fact that the system accepted the wager meant that there were more options. There were a few reasons for them not to be displayed, and a few he could discover, but Mercury never was a quitter. He wouldn't settle for options that had been deemed unsynergistic to him, or even too weak.

He was going for something stronger than the other ones listed.

First, the simple <Truth> of the existence of another option meant that <Seeker Of Secrets> had an easy angle of attack. Ihn'ar wrapped around his mind like a glove, enhanced by his newly gained <Lucidity>, and as he broke the second veil, he cracked the world open.

"Go get them, Appy."

[Of course, dum-dum.]

His friend, an agent of the system, used those cracks in the very idea of reason to turn onto itself, like a snake eating its own tail. System turned against system, a Skill meant to discover <Truths> used against what was hiding them.

And, of course, if Appy was the one hiding the truth in the first place, that meant she should have no trouble finding it. That train of thought, in turn, activated <Perceived Ease>, breaking down the very real barriers that should have been there.

<Intuition> and <Itinerant> combined to whisper a path through the twisting maze of system data, through the winding bits of knowledge that would have been species he deemed unworthy. Mercury started bleeding from his eyes from the strain of navigating a maze of data mostly on instinct.

<Hydration> activated as an aide to <Oceanic Consciousness>, letting his mind adapt to the digital maze of information that sought to burn through his synapses. His brain regenerated as his blood heated up and bubbled. Firewalls began to appear, but he dipped and dodged them, and whenever one was unavoidable, he threw <Sever> at it.

And once after another, the maze relented. Mercury darted through its paths, searching for the greatest secret he could find, for the details that he was never meant to achieve. For the <Truth> that he deserved. One after another, species flitted by and were discarded before he even saw their details, because they were simply not enough.

One by one, the data points were collected, and a picture of the web arranged itself in his mind. The ideas behind the species, the things that tied them together... and Mercury felt himself brush up against the third veil again.

His nose began bleeding, and he felt his heart cramping up, but he still kept searching. Appy tore through the maze that she was born in, as she should be able to. That was the <Truth>.

The Skills twisted in on their purpose to unveil and unwrap the working to him that were meant to be hidden. A personalized, infinitely adaptable assistant to allow people to reach their desires - and that primary function was now being used and exploited to reach deeper.

A million moments passed in no time at all. It took only seconds for the adventure to make Mercury's heart stop, but that wasn't enough to kill him. His stamina expanded, meeting his cells, and he whispered a plea to the <Water> in his blood to keep moving - and it did. He felt his brain frying, but his regeneration and <Oceanic Consciousness> kept him alive.

Any detail that would have killed him just for knowing it was swallowed up by <Nothingness>, any stray emotion that might have consumed him devoured by <Still Mirror>. And, throughout it all, his <Intuition> guiding the path.

Winding paths were conquered, defenses avoided, hidden from. The third veil taunted Mercury at the edge of his mind, but instead, he leaned on <Voidwalker> for the very first time, zipping through the growing gaps in the maze as reality failed. Step by step, his journey took him closer to that destination that he was never meant to reach.

Then came the penalty.

[For the duration of this bet, <Truth> is disabled.]

Instantly, the system's protections against exploitation set in. It was meant to be fair, after all, and without Mercury's <Truth>, his Skills didn't properly work on it. Instantly, he felt the strain on his head triple, and more of his minds had to pick up the slack, roused from their sleep.

His <Dream Manifested> around him, and he grit his teeth, refusing to have that ability sealed.

And, in truth, it wasn't fully disabled.

The system, after all, wasn't what gave Mercury his powers. He, himself, was.

And that's the <Truth>.

<Rainfall> raged against the imposed limitations, and the storm pushed them off just enough for his Skill to sputter back to life, and turn Appy's ability to act back up to full power. Another firewall shattered, and Mercury felt <Itinerant> tell him it was the end of the journey.

<Intuition> screamed at him, screamed to move and take the packet of data and power in front of him - and Mercury did just that. He reached out and took the <Secret>.

[Additional evolution unlocked.]

The system notification announcing it was perfectly calm as everything snapped back into place, like a taut rubber band.

[The individual is encouraged not to put their survival at risk for better evolution options. The individual is additionally encouraged to simply continue living and reach another evolution threshold. There are no limits imposed upon them.]

Mercury smiled, just a little.

[The system is attempting to act with the individual's best interests at heart.]

"Of course," Mercury confirmed. "Could I please see my additional option?"

[Applying upgrade to secret evolution.]

[Upgrade applied.]

[Lumyron:

One and all, where the light falls, this creature sees. Meaning is meaningless, the hidden is unveiled, and existence is just an inversion of <Nothingness>. Lumyrons are creatures which may maintain their mortal shells entirely through willpower. Answers appear before you ask. At a thought, reality fractures. Opposites are a simple step away, achievable through inversion. Bringing metaphysical weight and the power to alter reality itself, the Lumyron is as inevitable as it is unfathomable.

Due to your outrageous bet, the capabilities of your previous evolution options have been partially woven into the Lumyron. Your elemental abilities are heightened significantly. Your mental abilities are increased significantly. Your affinity for knowledge, secrets, and truths are increased precipitously.]

With a gentle motion, Mercury selected the choice that was at the very end of the maze, the very limit of what he could acquire at this moment, and then improved beyond. It was, very simply put, powerful.

"I would like to select the lumyron, please," Mercury said.

[Acknowledged.]

[The individual is now evolving.]

Despite the fact that his previous actions, by all rights, should have upset the system, the sheet of light descended as gently as ever.

A familiar blanket of white wrapped around his eyes, blocking out the bloody colosseum he was in. The tense feeling of wrath pulling at his mind vanished. He found himself in the same not-space that the system usually put him in.

Except, this time, it felt almost... fragile.

Mercury had become more “real”, as the system liked to call it. And, as that had happened, he’d grown his own world, and the outside had slowly turned more and more fragile. If he sank into ihn’ar, the gaps would become so apparent he almost couldn’t avoid looking into the void.

Of course, he could also stabilize that himself, but it was still different from the usual feeling. Rather than staying chained to the ground by gravity, it was like... having to *let* it affect him. Make a conscious choice to stay anchored.

It wasn’t difficult, but there were fewer chains. Fewer... safeguards, really.

He took a deep not-breath and waited for the change to set in. In that way, too, this evolution was different. He felt the light thicken before it began to seep into his skin. A blanket of radiance that altered what he was. Glimmering motes that pulled and stretched his metallic skin, made his bones larger as his skeleton adjusted itself to stand taller.

Inch by inch, he changed. Luminescent and <Nothingness> spiralled around him in a cascade of things, and after a few moments, the latter started interacting with his body, too.

<Nothingness> dug holes into him, for lack of a better word. The luminescence left his shape entirely dense, without anchors, and now, that infinitely small darkness that roamed between the threads of reality bored holding struts into Mercury. Through those microscopic gaps, he became more stable, more “in control” of who and what he was.

What a bizarre process it was, seeing his evolution take place. There were a hundred minor changes, too, to his bone density, his skin, his fur and how it interacted. His eyes, especially, were changed. Even more than they already were.

It made sense, after all, he needed to see the truth of things before he even asked. He felt his skins resonate with the formless solidity of his shape, the way it made things easier for

<Hydration> and <Shift> to change, while simultaneously becoming hardier. It was a bizarre effect, really.

And then came stranger and stranger changes yet. Ones related to the very ideas embedded in his body, tiny tweaks to his mana veins that made them strangely resemble runic arrays or mana formations. He felt himself change in a million ways, ones he could finally, for the first time, notice, but yet not quite understand.

But that was fine. He breathed.

A tiny <Rainstorm> sprouted in his chest, and let him find air even in this everchanging not-place. It filled his wispy, will-fuelled body, and made him exist just a little more solidly.

Oh, right, he was fuelled by his will now.

<Prevailing> triggered, and the ephemeral bits of his body instantly coalesced into a solid physical shape. The changes had mostly passed. He was taller now, standing about the head of a cheetah, maybe a little taller than that. It put his head right around the height of Zyl's ribcage.

And then, bit by bit, the motes of light withdrew, and Mercury found himself back in that bloody colosseum. Except, this time, the wrath wasn't tearing at his mind. This time, he felt the sand *warp* around him, drawn into the thin tendrils of his tornado.

His fur had intensified in colour. It was still the same silvery-white with purple stripes, but each bit of it had gained some of that depth his eyes used to have, where it was easy to almost get lost to him. It made his silhouette both indistinct, and yet sharp, making it hard to look away, but also hard to see properly.

Mercury could see all around himself, too. His eyes were no longer needed for something as simple as sight. Instead, they were *piercing*. Stabbing through obstacles as if they weren't there at all, unravelling the truths of the world as easily as breathing.

In front of Mercury, the colosseum began coming apart by itself, struggling to hold onto him. A flood of warriors poured towards him, driven by furious bloodlust, only to have scarlet droplets mix with a thick sheet of rain that ate away at their very existence.

All of it happened in Mercury's line of sight, since everything was in his line of sight. Every secret he stepped near to, every person whose aura he witnessed, everything. While his fur was ephemeral and warping, his eyes were even more so. They had become deeper than

even the darkest abyss, infinitely consuming and hungry. Each gaze pulled at the world with hunger, with a starving kind of ravenousness that was simply irresistible.

Mercury breathed.

The hunger disappeared into the void of his <Still Mirror> and he looked upon the world normally, the hints of swirling abyss in his eyes sealed behind layers of purple stardust clouds.

He looked at his notifications.

[<Prevailing> and <Perseverance> have fused into <Resolution lv. 1> through evolution.]

[Your existence has become more closely realized.]

[Your ability to understand has increased.]

[Your mind has become more powerful.]

[Acquired the Skill <Answer lv. 1> through evolution.]

[Acquired the Skill <Grain of Infinity lv. 1> through evolution.]

He smiled. Three Skills. More than any evolution ever before. And their names were rather incredible, too. He sent a small inquiry through <Seeker of Secrets>, querying their descriptions, and, by itself, <Answer> triggered and made the request inviolable.

[<Resolution>: A Skill intended for individuals whose physical and mental state is tethered more completely. Your resolve may reconstitute your body. As long as your bones are unbroken, your will is reinforced in turn. To kill someone with this Skill, their mind must be shattered, and their will blown away with the wind.]

It was an even stronger evolution of his survivalist kit. A true guarantee that, as long as he had a mind to think, he would not die. Simple as that.

[<Answer>: To ask is to want. The individual may now feed on knowledge, sustaining themselves off of secrets in addition to other means of consumption. To ask is to demand, too, and the individual will have an answer. When a question is parsed with great intent, the target will feel a growing pressure to answer. No limits in targeting.]

The next Skill was one that, effectively, turned him into a sapiovore. He could eat knowledge - not that he consumed it, entirely, really. He just subsisted off of gaining things for himself. What decided how “nutritious” a piece of information was, he wondered?

And, of course, the second part of the Skill. The fact that it would add intent to all questions asked, and if he didn’t allow someone to remain quiet, he could pull the <Truth> out of them. Terrifying.

Additionally, he already noticed the “no limitations” part. After all, the Skill had instantly worked on the system itself, pulling the information on his new Skills.

And finally...

[<Grain of Infinity>: At the very heart of the user lies a simple truth. You are unending. There is a hold within you that is a budding flower and a grain of stardust. It is infinity, it is giving, and it is inversion. You may draw from or feed this grain for various effects, and use its depths to alter the effects of your Skills.]

This one, despite the work of <Answer> was cryptic, but it was also his most impactful new Skill. He could tell that it was there, quietly, a manifestation of his silver sun, a tiny grain that was shimmering yet dark. It was, in and of itself, a contradiction that should never have been possible.

And yet, there is sat, right within his heart, within his core, within the deepest recess of his self where that last bastion of inviolable will laid. A pull that was thin but irresistible. A push that would not stop, ever. A gentle, entirely unstoppable force.

He took a deep breath.

The Skills were strong. They added to his build and expanded its scope. Mercury felt strong. Ready.

Finally, he called up his Status.

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Status:

Mercury Rainfall Starlight

Level: 1

Species: Lumyron

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

Alias: Beast, Mittens, dum-dum, Yr'enzel, Biso

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Hp: 2200/2440

Mp: 3500/3614

Sp: 1500/1534

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Strength: 130 (+5) -> 140

Vitality: 224 -> 254

Dexterity: 154 (+30) -> 164

Agility: 171 (+30) -> 191

Intelligence: 192 (+40) -> 222

Wisdom: 175 (+2) -> 205

Willpower: 418 -> 468

Luck: 175 -> 195

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Ability points: 201

World points: 6345

Skill points: 3200

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Gold: 24 265

Beast familiars: 1/2

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200 Stats. 100 Ability points. 1500 Skill Points.

Combined with the doubling of their effects, Mercury *really* felt the change. He was much stronger now. Harder to kill, and with a few new tricks in his box.

He took a deep breath, and the <Rainfall> around him wove into a typhoon. Instead of tiny droplets, it became a hurricane of destruction, amplified by his will, his resources, and the infinity quietly humming in his heart.

Slowly, he opened his eyes, his real eyes, and stepped forward.

Maybe it was time for Wrath to quake in fear.