

Chapter 261: Surrounded

[Main Quest: "Rends in Reality" advanced!]

Partial Reward granted by entity: <Dream Manifestation> mastery.]

[<Dream Manifestation> has levelled up! <Dream Manifestation lv. 2 -> 3>]

As he stepped through the void and arrived back in the mortal realm, there was another notification, too.

[<Itinerant> has levelled up! <Itinerant lv. 8 -> 9>]

He breathed in the fresh air and enjoyed the sunlight on his rapidly regrowing skin. A few seconds passed, and he stopped leaking blood onto the ground. The road home was right there, but he didn't walk it quite yet. Instead, he read the notifications.

[Level Up!]

[Level Up!]

[Level Up!]

Three of them, taking him from level 6 to level 9. With a small smile, he brought up his status.

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Status:

Mercury Rainfall Starlight

Level: 6 -> 9

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: 1032/2750

Mp: 2100/3854

Sp: 987/1634

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Strength: 141 -> 146 (+5)

Vitality: 270 -> 280

Dexterity: 167 (+30)

Agility: 193 (+30)

Intelligence: 225 -> 235 (+40)

Wisdom: 240 -> 255 (+2)

Willpower: 500 -> 505

Luck: 203 -> 218

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Ability points: 281

World points: 10 000

Skill points: 2600

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Gold: 51 950

Beast familiars: 1/2

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Glorious numbers going up. He was beginning to approach the second threshold on some more stats. Willpower was even trending towards 600, where he suspected the third upgrade would come. What if one of his stats hit a thousand?

His resources were reasonably low, but they were also already rapidly ticking back up. His regeneration was his strongest suit, after all. More so than overall durability.

“You know,” Avery said, looking at people walking home. “I can’t imagine the city council will look lightly on this.”

Mercury took a moment to consider those words, then nodded gravely. “You’re right,” he said. “But don’t worry. I’m working on a solution.” That was half a lie, but also a partial truth. There was, after all, a simple way he could help at least alleviate this problem.

He spent 131 of his saved up points on luck.

Luck: 218 -> 349

[The individual’s Luck has surpassed 300! Your fortune twists probability in your favour.]

And then, he proceeded to pour every ounce of luck he had into the thought that things in Stormbraver would go well. He wanted them to go well. He wanted to go home, open the door to his flat, lay in his silly hammock and enjoy the sunlight. He did *not* want some fossil knocking at his door, telling him he was banished from the city.

Of course, if that was their choice, he’d leave. He wasn’t going to tyrannically enforce his right to settle somewhere. If he was unwanted, he could find another place. It... really wasn’t all that hard, to be honest.

But with every stat increase, his active pool of luck had gone up, too. By now, he was rather confident that he could cause some major shifts in using it. Perhaps, if he were to enter a tear, he could make it so that the drops were rather amazing. After all, the only things he’d gotten from Envy was a few skill ups and a bit more territory to his dream.

Granted, though. That territory was valuable in and of itself. After all, by now, Mercury had a slight suspicion that he could make things from that realm into completely mundane objects. And if he could to that, well, then perhaps compressing a steel mountain from wrath into

some kind of superheavy sword was possible. He practically had materials that defied the laws of physics in how they interacted.

That was rather valuable to a crafter. Though Envy, being made mostly from bone and tissue, was harder to work with, he could also use it if he wanted to. Perhaps that was more suitable if he had an alchemy skill? He gave a soft sigh and closed his eyes, giving all the thinking a rest.

It was enjoyable to mull over everything, consider its implications and all that, but... he had to turn it off, occasionally. His zeyjn shut down, one by one, as all the fragmented pieces of his mind coalesced together. He'd split it almost automatically, keeping part of himself vigilant, and such.

Now, there was no more need for that. He closed his eyes, enjoying the soft buzz of conversation around him, and laying in the sun. There was no need for anything other than that. Nothing to do but let time drift by contently.

Except for the fact that he heard a whisper. A tiny noise at the edge of his mind. A small shaking of the <Tapestry>. That he was laying around, lazing about for a bit... it was turning him into a faint candlelight for Sloth to find.

And that was annoying. Mercury frowned at the sight, but still acknowledged it. Speaking the sins' name would only bring them about faster, after all. Acknowledging what he was doing as wrong... that would turn it into a problem real quick. So instead, he kept at it, and ignored the faint signal he was casting out.

There was no action that was without sin. Contentness always had an inkling of pride, of sloth, and even in simply enjoying the sunlight, one could read a bit of lust. Mercury's greatest sin in that regard was probably rather silly. He'd seen the sins stretch their definitions, so what if for Lust, it considered wanderlust a sin?

Wouldn't that make him a sinner and a half?

He snickered at the thought, but didn't discard it entirely. There was some component to the sins that meant that one's perception of them influenced them. The manticore of Wrath had known about guns, after all, and there weren't many modern sniper rifles on Chronagen. Which meant it must have drank from Mercury's own experiences with violence.

But that was fine. Hopefully he wouldn't encounter anything too sexual when he interacted with Lust. That would make telling the story to other people rather difficult, after all. Which wasn't a problem for him yet, but it would be if he told the story to anyone in the future.

Hopefully he'd have some kind of classy british sounding audiobook narrator to take care of any of those troubles, in case they popped up.

Moving on.

Mercury cracked open an eye when the sunlight vanished from his fur. Bael stood next to him, awkwardly. The demon towered over him by a lot, even when Mercury stood, since he was more long than he was tall. Now, with him laying down, she looked borderline titanic. "Sit down," Mercury chided her. "You're too far away."

Bael looked away awkwardly, not meeting his eyes. In response to that, Marcel gave a gentle snicker, then placed his butt in the grass, pulling on her hand. "C'mon," he said. "Sit with us."

She gave the receptionist an even more awkward look, both of her maws drawn into a crooked half-frown. Despite that, she slowly nodded, and got her legs underneath herself. She still absolutely towered over mercury, but some of that menace was removed by the fact that she sat criss-cross applesauce.

"You want something," Mercury noted. It wasn't a question, and he didn't press for an <Answer>. All it was, was an innocuous statement.

The demoness just looked at him, still not speaking. Marcel snickered again, but didn't otherwise contribute. Unfortunately, Mercury had perfected the art of patience. Especially when it was someone so clearly struggling.

Instead of particularly minding her, he gently relaxed again, placing his head down on his paws. He shifted just enough for sunlight to crest his ears again. It was a little funny to hear Bael shift, and he could feel her mana stir at the motion. There was some internal struggle going on.

Even more funnily, behind her, Aurora sat down in the grass with the skinstealers. And behind them, Otto held Breeze's hand. In an orderly queue. He almost snorted at that, but held back in order to preserve Bael's dignity. She was already struggling enough.

"It's he/him now, actually," the demon corrected, as if sniffing Mercury's thoughts.

“Of course, sorry,” the mopaaw answered.

“It’s fine,” Bael said, opening one of his maws again. For just another second, he sat there like a dead fish. Then, finally, the words came out. “I want you to sever the connection to gluttony.”

Mercury smiled, faintly, glad that he had managed the request. Even now, the demon lord looked awkward and uncomfortable, but sometimes, that was necessary for learning. And Bael definitely needed to learn how to ask for things, politely. “Why?” Mercury asked.

Instantly, the discomfort was back, but this time, Mercury did ask a question. That meant Bael would be encouraged to give an <Answer>. Now that the words had begun to flow, though, it would be easier.

“Because it disgusts me,” the demon said. He shifted on the grass, leaning back, turning his gaze to the sky, and supporting his bulk with massive arms stretched backwards. “The way I still feel it gnawing at me, like a missing other half. It’s a permanent reminder of what I was, what I no longer am. What I want to move past.”

The mopaaw tilted his head. His next question would be almost cruel, but he needed to ask it nonetheless. His eyes bored into the demon. “Oh? You aren’t some sort of hungry monster?”

“No!” Bael protested, slamming his hands into the ground, denting the earth. “No, damn it. I refuse to be that. To devour mindlessly again. I refuse to do that anymore. Sure, I’ll kill demons and devils and stuff, but they’re basically frothing at the mouth for it!” The words stumble out of him like a waterfall. One by one, the frustrations are laid bare.

“What? Are you upset about what you did before?” Mercury asked, coldly.

Bael eyes him with fury. “Yes, you bastard. Of course I am upset. People died. I know that much. I snuffed them out, and now others were left to mourn. I killed Breeze, and *look at him*,” he said, pointing to the boy. For his part, Breeze stood in line with Otto, eyeing the demon lord with a minor bit of sadness in his eyes.

“I ruined his life,” Bael ground out. “He’s back because of an act of luck. So many others got none of that. I regret it, because how couldn’t I?”

Zyl spoke, for the first time. His eyes were still closed, head resting in Mercury’s fur, but his lips moved. “The regret is what separates us from monsters,” he said quietly.

A thin smile appeared on Mercury's mouth. He pressed his snout gently against his boyfriend's temple in a small gesture of affection, nodding along. "Couldn't have said it better myself," he agreed. Then he faced Bael again. "You're fine, demon. You pass. You don't need me to stop you from being a monster," he said. "All I'll do is remove the reminder."

With his words, Bael froze. He stared at the mopaaw in shock, even as MARcel smiled amusedly. The receptionist had known Mercury for about three years now. He was used to all the mopaaw's tricks. Nothing new to him.

To the demon, though, it was surprising. "That was a test?" Bael croaked, through a mouth that barely wanted to open.

"Nope," Mercury shook his head. "It was proof, to yourself. You needed to say it out loud. Now you have my approval, and, if you think about it, maybe more of your own."

He blinked. The lord of all demons blinked for a long moment, then closed all his eyes. He stared at the sky, letting the sun fall on his face. "I see," he said, eventually.

"Now, if you're ready, I'll cut the cord," Mercury offered.

Another second passed, and time ticked onward. Bael simply sat and waited for his hearts to slow down slightly. He breathed in deep, then nodded. "Ready," he said.

Yet, the sensation was beyond what he expected.

All at once, when he gave his permission, there was a tug, and all of a sudden, his perspective changed. The world was cast in shades of iridescent monochrome. It all shimmered, as if an oil sheen had been cast over it. The falsehoods were pulled aside, and all that he was laid bare in and of itself.

There was a record, in front of him. A tome of every single thing he had ever done, every single thing he had ever thought, and how it all painted him to be the person he now was. It was a kaleidoscope of activity, a painting with every heartbeat as a brushstroke, every line drawn and remade and painted over a hundred times. A canvas full of infinite layers.

And all of it peeled back.

Second by second, each facet of his self was revealed and laid bare. In a single, sudden, revolting and freeing moment, Bael felt himself come undone. He felt the way that the breath leaked from his lungs, and it felt like getting knocked, hard. It was uncomfortable, but it was *real*. Unlike every other cloudy, shitty decision he'd made in his miserable life, this was real.

It showed every flaw, every mistake, and yet, faced with it from right there, it showed each virtue he held. The politeness he'd learned, the simple shows of affection he did, the strangely unfamiliar and newly budding urge to hold something dear. It was a beautiful road, and he was looking behind at a path of footsteps he'd taken.

Footsteps that had brought him from being a mindless, murderous beast, to where he was now. To who he was now. Footsteps that showed who he had been and who he was.

And then, with a gentle broom, something changed. His eyes stopped being drawn to those early moments, stopped being drawn towards something that wasn't there anymore.

In a single swift moment, dirt was cast over a part that wasn't his. When he had been dragged along by something else. That tether, that leash was gone. Disappeared. Cut away with a simple swipe of someone's claws. Pulled away from all the other things that made him who he was.

Something had been lost, inevitably, irrevocably, and somewhere deep down, that hurt a little. It was different. Things would be different. And yet, Bael was sure that they would be better.

All at once, he snapped back into himself.

Mercury was in front of him, with a somewhat tired look in those unfathomably deep eyes. He panted slightly, his tongue hanging from his mouth just a little. "There you go," he said. "Complex piece of work you are."

"I've come far," Bael said breathlessly. It wasn't a brag, it was a notice of surprise. He himself felt the way that his heart beat at the acknowledgement, at how used he was to rebelling against it. Yet, now, he could see it. Without being drawn to a past that was long ago, he could see it.

There was still so much loss to mourn. None of that hid from him. But he stopped being forced to look at it. He could finally go home from the funeral, instead of staring at an open mass grave for more years. Open wounds could start to heal.

"You have," Mercury nodded. "And, like anyone else, you still have far to go. So keep living. Keep doing better. Figure things out, learn, improve, and try to do good. That's all we can do," he said. "That's all we should do."

Bael nodded. For once, he understood. The words rang <True> to him. If everyone simply did their best to be good, the world might be a better place.

Doing good, though, meant doing right by himself, too. It meant not living in agony. It meant not sacrificing one's own happiness to please someone else. Some part of doing good meant being selfish. His own joy was part of this world, too, after all.

Aurelia gently poked Bael in the back. "Sorry mr. demon, but could we get our chance with Mercury now?" she asked.

Blinking awkwardly, the lord of all demons looked at the not-quite-human. "Uh, right," he said, shuffling aside. "Sorry, yeah, go ahead."

"Thank you," Aurelia said with a beaming smile. It was a little too wide, her skin stretching slightly more than it should.

Mercury snickered slightly at the sight. There was something funny about seeing the giant demon scoot over. Especially given that he could rather easily walk on his arms, having four of them. But after only a few awkward seconds, Aurelia was face to face with Mercury.

Well, not quite. Mercury was still a bit shorter, but it was close enough. He'd probably get some sort of shapeshifting ability soon, and that would solve his height issues forever. The once-skinstealer-now-something-else waved her hand in front of his face. "Hellooooo?" she asked, in an amused tone. "You there?"

"Yes, yes, I'm listening," Mercury said with a huff of amusement, shaking his head. People were so silly.

Aurelia smiled happily, then tilted her head. "You know, saviour-"

"Still not doing the cult bit," Mercury chided.

The not-human rolled her eyes. "Fine then. Mercury. We need a name for our new species. The system hasn't granted us one yet, so we've talked, and we want you to come up with one. You've given many of us names, and effectively created us. As our father-"

"No, we're not doing the pseudo-adoption thing either," Mercury instantly interrupted her with a glare.

Aurelia nodded sagely. "Of course, of course. Regardless, please do try to come up with a reasonable name, if you would? We do not want to push you, of course, but we would appreciate it."

At that, Mercury gave a small sigh. He couldn't refuse such an earnest request after all. "Fine, fine," he said, waving his paw slightly. "Uh, you can call yourselves... changelings?" he suggested.

"*Changelings*," Aurelia repeated, tasting the word on her tongue. Then, she smiled again, tilting her head slightly. The sun caught in her hair and glittered. "I like it!" she said happily. Then, she turned to the rest of the shifters. "Any objections?"

All that followed was a bunch of shrugs and soft affirmations. No one complained. Well, other than Oscar, but he was grouchy and there was no way to please him anyway. That had been the case before Mercury removed the envy from him, too, and it was still the case now. After all, he'd tried to keep their personalities intact as much as possible.

"That works then. Do you need anything else?" he asked.

"Well..." Aurelia shifted a little, looking not quite comfortable with the request.

Mercury almost sighed again. Would he have to drag it out of her, too? "Cmon, out with it already. What do you want?" he asked, activating <Answer> to make it easier on her.

"We don't have a place to stay, really," she admitted. "So, we wanted to ask... where we should go? None of us want to go back to how we lived before."

Almost dismissively, Mercury waved his paw again. "Go wherever you want. You're your own people."

"Well, yes," Aurelia said, "but we don't know where to start. It's... complex. We have enemies who might not forgive us as easily. There's gonna be trouble and-"

Avery tapped the side of her head. He'd just kind of appeared in a soft gust of wind, ready to poke her. "Come to Stormbraver," he said with a bright smile, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

"But what if the people there don't want us?" Aurelia asked, balling her fists.

"How childish," Avery said with a snicker. His grin just widened. "Make them like ya. It's that simple. Look at my man Mercury. He keeps causing trouble, and yet, he's not been thrown

out. Because he's cool. So, be cool. Open a bakery. A restaurant. A flower shop. Do things, help people, live happily," he said, crossing his arms and grinning.

The changeling leader stared at him slightly. "As if it was that simple," she said quietly. "It's never that simple."

"Life is complicated if you make it so," Avery nodded. "But it can be simple. If someone bothers you, get away from them. If there's someone you like, stay close to them. If there's someplace you wanna go, go there. If there's something you wanna do, *do it*. Unless it hurts people.

"Freedom is bigger than people think," Avery said. "Freedom goes far and wide. It only ends where you hurt others. Living someone isn't hurting others. Eating nice food isn't hurting others. Hell, sometimes even stealing is harmless," he snickered. "You've just gotten a taste of that - freedom. Don't throw it away just because something bad might happen. Grab life by the throat and live it, ya dummy."

Mercury shook his head at the guild master's antics. "You really love to collect misfits, huh?" Mercury asked with a gentle smile.

"Kahahahaha!" Avery threw his head back and laughed, then gave an excited thumbs up. "Ya caught me, Mercury. I just can't abide by people being stupid. All these self-imposed rules, this rage at their impotence when all the barriers are just mental." He grinned, happily. "Things are hard, yea. Shit sucks sometimes, yea. So keep living and doing good anyway."

Aurelia blinked. The words must've felt like a smack to the head. Mercury tilted his head in curiosity. What would she do now? Fold and give up and insist on her limits? Or would she take it to heart and break through?

Wasn't that always the question? Whether things would be better or worse often depended on whether someone had the will to do the things that would make it better. Sometimes that meant resting, sometimes that meant chasing happiness relentlessly.

And Aurelia... she balled her fists, and breathed out in a single, long moment. Then she opened her eyes with grim determination and utmost sincerity. "Fine then," she said, as if readying herself to go to war. "We'll go to Stormbraver. And if anyone wants us out, we'll just convince enough people to want us in."

"Kahaha! That's the spirit," Avery said happily, ruffling her hair. Then, he just walked away, slinking off to... kick some trees apparently. Entirely normal behaviour.

With that all done, the changelings, one by one, walked off. Down the brick road, and towards Stormbraver. It was kind of funny, seeing them march off, filled with determination, to go... plant some vegetables or something? Mercury still wanted to learn a bit more about farming, but he'd get to that, too.

No hurry in things, when he had plenty of his life left to live.

Really, with the fact that he could think himself into existence, and that his mind was no longer bound by his brain, he did wonder how old he could get. Probably as old as he wanted to. The only thing that might kill him was having... his mind splintered.

Into uncontrolled, overgrown parts that weren't really him, anymore.

Huh. That sounded vaguely familiar. There was someone in his life who was quite like that, wasn't there? Something to consider asking about in the future, too.

For now, he focused on the people across from him. "Mercury," Otto greeted with a gruff nod of acknowledgement. Breeze, for his part, gave a shy wave, the boy sticking to the older man's side. Mercury smiled faintly.

"You two get along well?" he asked.

"Mh," Otto nodded again. "We do. Kid is kind. I like him," he said, in that same plain, open-hearted way he always was. "I want to make home for him," he added.

Breeze turned a little red at that, looking aside. Mercury tilted his head. "Really now?" he asked. "And what would that be like?"

"Stack bricks, make house," Otto said simply.

"In Stormbraver?" Mercury asked, smiling slightly. He could see Zyl's lips curl upwards as well at the thought, even though the dragon still kept his eyes closed, acting as if he were asleep. Just because he wanted to use Mercury as a pillow, the rascal.

Otto nodded once more. "Yes, in Stormbraver. Want to live in the same city as Zyl and Lucy."

The priestess turned and almost summoned a bow at the nickname. "Lucy?" she whispered under her breath. "I'm going to fucking strangle-"

Iris giggled and ruffled her hair. "There, there, my love. Take it easy. It is a good day. Do not light it aflame."

In response, Lucia grumbled, but turned away. Otto simply wore a pleasant smile, his fangs poking into his upper lip. He seemed content with himself. Had he... teased Lucia on purpose? Was there some mischief baked into his bones after all?

"In Stormbraver, then," Mercury said with a smile, giving his approval. "Maybe we'll teach you how to cook yet, Otto."

"I great cook," the big lug protested.

"You eat most food raw," Mercury noted.

"Very delicious!" Otto confirmed. "Meals tasty. Means I am great cook."

The mopaaw snickered at his self-satisfied expression. "Fair enough," he said. "If you need help building, look for an old man named Yasashiku Ryuutesai. He should be able to help you stack bricks if you need. Otherwise, Foss or Nira from the merchant's guild might be able to help as well."

"Thanks," Otto said, then turned away, still holding Breeze's hand. "C'mon little storm. We go make a home."

Breeze blinked, and Mercury saw his eyes glinting with a bit of wetness. Despite that, the boy's face cracked into a wide smile. "Alright!" he said happily, walking off hand in hand with Otto.

Seems Stormbraver would grow a little more after this event. Mercury sighed softly as the sunlight graced him again, all the little problems having walked off on their own volition. He made a mental note to thank Yasashiku later for building the road. Somehow, he had ended up the city's talent recruiter... which was a bit bizarre to think about, but he didn't really mind it.

One by one, people filtered out of the clearing. Some said goodbye, some just walked off, until, at some point, it was just Mercury and Zyl left. Again, the mopaaw tapped his boyfriend's face with his snout. "Wanna go home?" Mercury asked, peacefully.

Zyl smiled, ran a hand through his boyfriend's fur, and then kissed his forehead. "Yeah," the dragon said. "Let's go home."

And they walked, peacefully, to that place. Mercury didn't turn around, even when he was certain that someone was watching. Someone was always watching, after all, and he would just deal with the problems as they came to him. One by one.

Living life to the best of his ability, surrounded by his loved ones.