

Chapter 252: Quests and Guests and Blessed Artefacts

[Level Up!]

Mercury smiled at the small notification in the corner of his vision. He wanted to go home, so he did. His desire was fulfilled, and so, the system acknowledged it.

-

[Main Quest: "Wrath" completed!]

Reward: <Veil> mastery increase, <Sever> mastery increase, <Combat Sense> mastery increase, <Cloudmatter Shawl> becomes bound item.]

-

[<Veil> has levelled up! <Veil lv. 5 -> 7>]

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

[<Combat Sense> has levelled up! <Combat Sense lv. 4 -> 6>]

That last part of the reward was a bit different. The cloudmatter shawl was already absorbing some part of wrath, and this additional infusion of energy just poured into it to hasten and strengthen... whatever was happening with it.

Having everything settle took time. Mercury just ate a whole miniature world. Digesting it wouldn't be instant, and that was okay. However, he did note that the quest completed, which was strange, given that the requirement was to "repair the tapestry".

Mercury was really rather sure he hadn't done any repairing.

"Hey, Zyl at Mercury," his boyfriend said, booping his nose. "You there?"

"Ah, yeah, sorry," he said. "Just going over some notifications."

Zyl smiled slightly. "Right, right," he said. "Well, I'll just finish cooking for the demon lord, and you join us at the table whenever you're ready."

"It's demon lady right now, actually," Bael replied.

"Right, right, of course," Zyl corrected.

Mercury, too, just nodded. "Sounds good." He thought on the notification a moment, then it clicked. "Wait, demon lady?"

At that, his boyfriend and the unexpected guest laughed. "Yes, demon lady," Zyl said. "Followed your scent here, actually. But, before all of that, I'll have to politely ask why there are two holes in you."

"... Right. Uh. The avatar of wrath had a gun?" Mercury said hesitantly.

"You'll have to give me a rundown of what a gun is," Zyl said with a soft sigh.

At that, the demon lady, Bael, raised her hand. "I know, actually. Zagan showed me one, once. Fascinating piece, between art and warfare. They use some sort of mechanism or magic in order to propel some kind of moderately heavy projectile really, really fast."

Zyl furrowed his brows slightly. "So... like a bow? But... stronger?"

Shrugging, Bael nodded. "Sure, that's about right."

"It's a lot louder and faster than a bow, and the skill required to use it is a lot lower. Even a child could fire a gun. But essentially, yes."

"You got torn up by a kid's toy?" Zyl asked, raising an eyebrow and crossing his arms.

"No," Mercury said. "And the food is burning."

"Crap!"

With hurried movements, the dragon faced the stove again. Bael snickered about it. Her voice was melodic, but the laugh was a little too spiteful to be one to laugh alongside. Mercury eyed her for a moment, before disregarding it. The avatar she wore was nothing but a skinsuit for the monster beneath.

It was all the clearer to him now. The ease with which he could strip that kind of fakeness away was almost concerning. <Answer>, <Truth> and <Unravel> were a scary synergy against illusions and falsehoods. But, if she identified as a woman right now, then was that skinsuit really a falsehood?

What was shapeshifting, really?

“Hey, mopaaw. You’re thinking too hard about it,” she said, leaning back in the chair. “Don’t stare so much. It’s awkward when we’re almost siblings.”

And there it was. Instantly, Mercury saw the connection. The white veil was shattered, and the string of fate uniting the two of them was revealed: she, as well as him, was involved with the seven sins. The wayward avatar of gluttony. The thing that had escaped the ashen plains before they were ashen at all.

“You’re from gluttony,” Mercury said.

At that, the monster’s mouth split open wide. Wider than that of a human should. “Yes, I am,” she said. “And so are you, somehow. And yet, you are also of wrath. And despite that, you aren’t angry. You aren’t hungry. You are calm and full.” She leaned forward, off the table, staring at him with hungry eyes and licking her lips. “So tell me... how do you tast-”

She paused, holding her head. “Ugh. Gross.” Then she leaned back. “Your eyes are fucked. What the hell’s that?”

Mercury blinked, letting himself fade out of ihn’ar, letting the truth and inner storm swirl behind a layer of clouds. “Right, sorry. Please don’t talk about eating me, either.”

“... Yeah. My bad. Hunger’s a lot sometimes.” She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “Sort through your system stuff. I’ll still be here after. Must be a chunk.”

Somewhat surprised at how easily the tension diffused, Mercury smiled a little. Instead of standing awkwardly in the middle of the kitchen, he made his way up the stairs - needing to watch his step a little more, now that he was a chunk taller. Still, at the end of the day, the staircase was an unworthy foe and he conquered it easily enough.

With a few more steps, he made it to a hammock spun from his very own thread, hopping up the posts on the wall leading to it. The wood was adjacent enough to <Grass> and grew out to meet his paws wherever they landed. It was a kind of natural support the world lent him, now. A kind of natural rapport between him and the realm he was in.

It seemed to only have strengthened after he devoured wrath, and Mercury had a sneaking suspicion why that was. But for now, he gently placed that aside. Instead... he called on Appy. “Status.”

=

Status:

Mercury Rainfall Starlight

Level: 3 -> 6

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

===

Hp: 2250/2650

Mp: 3500/3754

Sp: 1500/1634

===

Strength: 140 -> 141 (+5)

Vitality: 259 -> 270

Dexterity: 164 -> 167 (+30)

Agility: 191 -> 193 (+30)

Intelligence: 222 -> 225 (+40)

Wisdom: 220 -> 240 (+2)

Willpower: 483 -> 500

Luck: 200 -> 203

===

Ability points: 251

World points: 8849

Skill points: 2900

===

Gold: 38 815

Beast familiars: 1/2

=

The first thing he noted was that despite crossing 500, his willpower did not clear a new threshold. Which meant that the next stage was probably at 600, then. Which, he supposed, meant it followed an additive total kind of formula.

First, reach 100. Then add 200 more for 300. Then add 300 more for 600. Then add 400 more for 1000.

It was similar with levels and evolutions. First at ten levels, then at 20, meaning thirty total. Then at 30, meaning 60 total. Then at 40, meaning 100 total. Which meant he'd now, most likely, evolve at level 50, meaning a total level of 150.

He sighed as he got distracted again. That happened too easily when he could think so many things at the same time.

Focusing again, Mercury returned to his ongoing notifications. The first and most important realization was confirmed in a main quest.

-

[Main Quest: "Rends in Reality." Chain <2>

Condition: You have consumed a wound in the world. Where Wrath once raged, there is now nothing. No new scars shall be made by that remnant reality. No new tunnels opened in the fabric of reality. Chronagen is more stable, thanks to you. In its own way, this world wants you to repeat this feat.

Erase another realm that tears this reality apart. Please?

Notice: This quest is sent as a request by an entity involved with the system. It can be declined, but will occupy a main quest slot due to significant overlap of interest with the individual it is proposed to.

Reward: <Realmshifting> affinity increase, <Worldhealer> title.

Note: Additional rewards may be granted by the entity requesting this task to be completed.]

-

It was, by far, the most amusing quest message he had ever gotten. Shaking his head slightly, Mercury accepted the request. Yes, he'd probably close more of those realms. After all, with the veil of separation being torn down, he now could see where his own fate drew him. There were a million tiny strings, pulling him a million tiny ways.

And yet, he was sure they'd draw him to those other realms eventually. After seeing wrath and gluttony... he was sure that the others had hurt people, too. And that was something he could not let stand idly. In the same way that the fae realm was dying, these realms were slowly killing Chronagen. As someone living on that world, he could not let it stand.

So, since he had the power to change it, and a request made by the world he had built his home on, Mercury accepted. He wanted to ensure that nothing broke his and Zyl's house. He'd be very upset if something hurt Kintra back in Treyno. There were people on this planet he cared about, and letting some wayward monsters crawl out of the sky whenever they pleased didn't exactly seem like something he could tolerate.

Mercury drew a deep breath, and tasted the way the air felt to his lungs. The wind seemed to whisper a tiny word of thanks to him at that moment. The world felt a little kinder, a little easier on him, as if his existence was suddenly more accepted. It was a strange baseless feeling, and yet it was one that he let wash over himself.

He loved this world, and that was the <Truth>.

And with that truth came an <Answer>. The world liked him back.

So there was no reason why he wouldn't help when it was hurting.

With that dealt with, Mercury calmly pushed the quest notification aside, letting it vanish like so many of those blue boxes before. Then he took a breath.

In his dreamscape, his items were still evolving. The Stifled Silence hovered around the silver sun in resplendent glory. A diadem of vines, an ocean of liquid metal trapped in a simple gem in its middle. Next to it was the Dream of Starvation, reduced into a shapeless, writhing glob of sinister steel. It was hungrily devouring every bit of wrath it had consumed. All the blood, all the anger. A hungry thing of nightmares, growing ever more fearsome.

And, finally, there was a third bound item. The Dracoleather Cloak. For the first time in ages, it was not properly wrapped around him. It was torn at by the void, but had survived even that harrowing journey, and now sat as part of his storm - fusing with the Cloudmatter Shawl in order to produce something new.

Bits and pieces of that devoured realm fed into his nexus, the dense web of threads slowly being organised under that radiant star's touch. Mercury could feel it. And a simple appraisal, part of <Seeker Of Secrets>, revealed all of its growth.

[Nexus Rank 1 -> 2]

The notification was simple, but it belied what it meant. An increase from 0 to 1 meant that his world was true enough to be a reality of its own. Now, it was somehow greater. More real. More... alive. He called up the full description.

[Nexus: Rank <2>.

World management improved. Soil and Temperature regulation systems available. Biosphere simulation possible. Enhanced amalgamation potential. World stability greatly enhanced. Tunnel functionality enabled. Temporary overwrites possible. Lesser permanent manifestations enabled.]

Word soup, his favourite. "Appy, what does this mean?" he asked.

[The individual's dreamscape has gained additional solidity, allowing permanent entrance and exit points to be set into other realities, as well as having achieved availability to support fully biological lifeforms for semi-permanent durations. Fully fledged biomes can now be created more easily. Products made in the inner world can be permanently manifested in other realities with lesser investments of mental energy. Other words will be more easily grafted onto the nexus. Overwrites... are complex.]

He nodded, slowly. All of that basically amounted to the fact that his inner world was now decidedly more liveable. The permanent access and exit points seemed a little suspicious.

They were rather close to arches, after all, which often had world cores that needed breaking by seekers.

[Confirmed. You may create arches.]

“And why exactly am I being given that capability when it seems rather bad for this world’s stability?” he asked.

[Tunnels - permanent access points to other realities - and rifts - temporary access points to other realities - generally aim to siphon resources and stability off this realm. This is a choice driven by their world cores who may be hungry for expansion, or simply staving off their own death from existence. As long as the individual does not actively choose to take threads of reality from this realm’s weave, tunnel functionality is generally considered safe.]

“What are temporary overrides, then?” he asked.

[Overrides constitute a complete metaphysical and physical replacement of a section of one world with another. Manifestations are metaphysical overlays. They are pseudo-real and essentially constitute two realms being in the same place. An override requires the displacement of the target reality, creating a far more complete assertion in exchange for greater dimensional shifts.]

Mercury blinked. “Can you, uh, simplify that?”

[They move a part of this world somewhere else for a bit. Which can cause exposure to the void, or easier attacks from other realities. The world can also be shunted aside into itself using spatial realm compression.]

“That’s not much simpler,” Mercury grumbled.

[The individual’s dum-dum-ness cannot be fully compensated for by the assistant intelligence’s skill due to their excessive capability for silliness. The system does not take responsibility for poorly understood abilities.]

Mercury rolled his eyes, giving a small sigh. He supposed it made enough sense. Once again, his inner world had become more real. The biggest change was the ability to house actual physical objects. It really wasn’t much of a dreamscape anymore, at this point.

And yet, he could create matter. If that matter was then entirely physical... Hmm. It was at the point where he could single-handedly break the laws of thermodynamics again, wasn’t

it? If he increased his world's rank another time or two, and learned to weave reality a bit better, could he create something of a post-scarcity society?

He shook his head. All of that was just a little too much for him right now. Instead of worrying about it a lot, he decided to let the items keep evolving in his inner realm and eat some food. He was feeling peckish - physically, that is. Not metaphysically. His inner world was stuffed. But his very physical stomach wasn't.

Ah, it did have a gunshot wound in it, though. Well, nothing a quick application of <Shift>, <Hydration> and <Resolve> couldn't patch up. Mostly.

- - -

Dinner was tasty. Zyl make some baked not-potatoes, as well as some stir fry on the side. Mercury was truly glad for <Nutritional Preservation>, since by now he ate almost entirely vegetarian. Not that he really... needed to eat anymore. But hey, he no longer had to kill any unknowing animals for his meals, and being allowed to make that choice was nice.

Bael wasn't exactly a picky eater, either. Mercury did not fail to notice the lingering scent of Zyl in their mouth, though. The simple physicality of it was easily detectable by <Greater Perception> and his rather good nose. "Hey, Bael?"

"Hmmm?" the demoness hummed in reply, mouth stuffed with food.

"Did you cannibalise my boyfriend a bit?"

Instantly, Bael's eyes went wide. She choked on the meal, coughing and smacking her chest for a few moments. Then, after a few scant moments that Mercury was sure were mostly a habit to feel more human, she threw a crooked grin. "... Maybe?"

Slowly, Mercury nodded. "Zyl, did it hurt?"

The dragon grabbed the side of his neck, rubbing his shoulder a bit. "Well, yeah. Tolerable, though. I'm tough," he smiled.

"Did you dislike it?" Mercury asked.

Zyl snickered slightly before nodding. "Of course I did. Getting eaten is an unpleasant experience."

At this point, Bael was starting to look a bit sheepish, so Mercury turned to face her again. His single eye was ice cold, the other still weaving itself from ribbons of silver. "Hey," he said. "I'll let it go this time, but if you try to hurt him again, I'll kill you."

The simple purity of the phrase made the lady of demons blink. "Huh?" she asked.

Mercury laced his words with <Truth>. "I will kill you."

He made sure that it had landed for a few moments, before repeating it one more time. "I'll kill you. This isn't a threat. I don't mind if you two spar or even fight. I have full trust in Zyl, but I need you to understand that it is very simple to me. My friends are dear to me. If they get hurt, I eliminate the problem. It might not be today, it might not be tomorrow, but I will figure you out, and take you apart. If you hurt him again, you're a dead demon walking. Got it?"

Every word was laced with power. <Truth> confirmed that he meant it to Bael. She quite literally had no choice but to believe that he was entirely sure she'd die. <Answer> made it so that she couldn't avoid replying. It was a faint pull at first, but intensified with her silence. Like a buzzing pressure in her ears. Somewhere between having a mosquito in the room at night and slowly sinking deeper into an endless ocean and drowning with only one way up.

Annoyed, she grimaced a little, waving a hand as if to chase the strange feeling away. "Fine, yea, jeez. I'll try not to break your boytoy."

"Boyfriend," Mercury corrected. "Not a toy at all."

"Yeah, yeah. Boyfriend. Whatever," she said, rolling her eyes. "Can I keep eating now?" she asked.

Mercury smiled. "Please do." He ate a bit more food himself, as Zyl's hand wrapped around his shoulder. The touch was warm, and when he looked over, the dragon was giving him a smile.

"It's okay," Zyl said. "I can take care of myself. No need to worry about me."

"Of course, love," Mercury said. "But worrying is what partners do, isn't it."

At that, the dragon snickered again. "Yes. Yes, it is. I want you to be safe, so I get that you'd want me to be safe, too."

"But we're both adventurers. Which is troublesome."

Zyl nodded along. "Troublesome indeed. Alright. You get to worry about me a little," he said with a wink, then kissed Mercury on the forehead. "But don't go threatening to kill people on my behalf. That's a little rude."

"You may have a point," Mercury added sheepishly.

"I haven't even served dinner yet, silly. At least let the poor woman finish her meal before saying you'll kill her," he chided. Then he looked at Bael. "The dinner is pudding, by the way. I made pudding."

The demon lady, ruler of the infernal cities, smiled faintly. "I'd love some pudding." Then she looked at Mercury. "And it's fine. I've dealt with ruder people. Demon's are straightforward like that."

"Are they?" Mercury asked. "Aren't demons tricksters?"

At that, Bael laughed. "No, not at all. Well, a little, sure, but it's the *devils* you really gotta watch out for. Demons are straightforward, well, as much as you can generalize a group of people, y'know," she said, waving a hand in front of her casually. "We love war, and fighting, and booze, and general loudness. We like contracts and deals and honor our word. Making agreements is a big part of culture, but the very act of making them is fun."

"Devils, though?" she shook her head and scoffed a little. "Devils are different. Devils are tricksters. They love *negotiating*," she almost spits the word. "Making deals is their love and their passion, but they love the art of crafting them, rather than sticking to them. Does that make sense? They also still like war and bloodshed, but more for profit than for the simple joy of fighting."

Zyl smiled sadly. "So the war on Arterus is still ongoing?"

"It never ends," Bael said, crossing her hands and grinning. "It never should. War is our best pastime. Plus, with all the resurrection circles and the inborn persistent soul trait, it's also a great way to make friends."

How strange that all sounded. It was funny, but Mercury had, in fact, not seen a single demon in wrath's colosseum. Even though he was rather sure demons were angry, spiteful creatures, even here. But they also enjoyed the battle. Wrath was a bit about that, but really, the trapped souls didn't get to enjoy it. Wrath did. Its avatars.

Maybe those steel monstrosities had been partially made from demons? He wondered idly. It didn't really matter anymore, after all. Wrath was dead, and he killed it.

Instead of worrying about the eternal war or the moral implications of the unending armies constantly throwing themselves at each other in bloodshed, he simply focussed on the pudding. There were multiple small ones in cups with different flavours. Chocolate and not-quite-vanilla and something that was vaguely citrus-like. All delicious.

"Thank you for the meal, Zyl," Mercury said. "It was amazing."

"Yes, thank you," Bael agreed.

Beaming at the compliments, Zyl quickly took the plates to the sink and placed them aside for a little while. "Alright, let's get down to business, then." He said. "Why-"

"Ah, one more second," Mercury said. His vision was filled with notifications. "My bound items finished updating."

[<Dream of Starvation>:

Grade: Bound B - Proficiency (673/1000)

Rank: 3 - Growth (113/1000)

Attributes: <Malleable>, <Iron Shell>, <Irreality>, <Warping Fury>]

[<Iron Shell>: This item can entirely encase its user, providing immense buffs to defense and benefiting from any and all defensive traits the user owns. Additionally, all natural weaponry will be enhanced, and the user's healing can be sped up by letting the Dream of Starvation consume blood.]

[<Irreality>: A weapon that is halfway in a dream can strike at others' minds. You no longer need to leave physical wounds. Target their astral selves directly. Additionally, you may defend against mental attacks with this tool, too.]

[<Warping Fury>: The hungry dream has found anger. Its desire for bloodshed has increased. It will take everything from an opponent. The intimidation effect is strengthened, the lasting scars are stronger to heal, and the weapon's reach has grown. It may carve through space, and ignores a portion of armor, rending flesh immediately.]

It had grown stronger. Much, much stronger. Mercury felt it in the runes. It was “only” a grade B item, but that would increase as he got more familiar with it. By now, the liquid metal could encase him, enhance all his attacks, allow for some shapeshifting with <Malleable> to mimic extra limbs, and directly target someone’s fears without even leaving a scratch on them. And it even let him cheat his effective range, which would pair nicely with <Sever> and <Bite>.

In short, it was strong. And yet, somehow, Mercury was more excited for what had come of his cloak.

[<Storm’s Raiment>:

Grade: Bound A - Proficiency (323/1000)

Rank: 2 - Growth (298/1000)

Attributes: <Cloudveil>, <Pocket>, <For The Road>, <Stormwings>, <Storm’s Fury>]

[<Cloudveil>: An evolution of the <Muffled> attribute held by the dracoleather cloak, the Raiment can cloak the user. This provides a buff to all stealth attributes, makes them more likely to be perceived as part of the environment, especially when raining, and strongly reduces any noise produced by the user.]

[<Pocket>: The Storm’s Raiment features a pocket space. Objects can be instantly deposited and withdrawn from this pocket realm with only a thought. Electrically charged or wet objects take up less space. Note that the objects must be free of intent in order to be stored.]

[<For The Road>: An adventurer’s blessing, this attribute means that the item will repair itself even while summoned. Additionally, it can shapeshift, change colour, provides the user enhanced protection from all weather and elements, can be used as a tent and a sleeping bag, and even be used as drinking water when needed. It may be used to start fires, and may maintain the shapes of minor implements for a short while, such as lockpicks, machetes, whittling knives, etc. Anything one may need while travelling, the Raiment shall provide.]

[<Stormwings>: When fuelled by mana, the raiment may expand to grant the user wings and allow them to fly.]

[<Storm’s Fury>: The Raiment will store and build electricity, infusing it into all the user’s weather-based Skills and Abilities if the individual so chooses. Its lightning strikes come

faster and cause more destruction than conventional discharges. Additionally, they linger within the body, causing paralysis and reducing the effects of the target's vitality attribute and any defensive skills.]

He took a long, deep breath, and summoned the Storm's Raiment around his shoulders. It was malleable, soft as the shawl had been. It wrapped around his neck, and then draped itself over his back, where his trusty cloak always was. Even now, it felt just the same. He customized it a bit, making it look fabric-like, with bits of gilding on the back, and an embossed tree, while the edges of it frayed away into white-grey clouds.

Feeling the embrace of <For The Road> and the way it made every comfort just a little more comfortable... he smiled. He hadn't noticed just how much he'd missed the cloak while it was evolving. But now, it was back. And it wrapped around him like a piece of his home that he could forever take with him, in the form of a silver-green cloak and shawl. It was lovely.

It was a little silly, but with it wrapped around his neck, he felt ready to face the future.
"Alright, Bael. What do you need?"