

Chapter 245: Metallurgy

[<Apprentice Runecarving> has levelled up! <Apprentice Runecarving lv. 1 -> 5>]

Over just a few days, Mercury had improved his enchanting by a lot. With four separate streams of consciousness, it was easy to learn new runes, apply them, and also try out different methods of enchanting. He'd not yet seen a lot of success in positive enchanting - forming the inscriptions out of material, instead of carving them into something.

However, when it came to actually carving, his technique had improved more than his levels might imply. There was a simple reason for that, too. Well, two reasons, really.

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

<Nothingness> and <Sever>. They made carving runes into things easy, even when he just used his mind. He could manipulate his rijn to enhance the effects of the Skills by giving his mind a sharp edge, then carve through almost anything. <Sever> was an expert at disconnecting bonds, and wherever it failed, <Nothingness> simply erased whatever was there from existence.

And so, Mercury found himself surrounded in a few hundred discarded, broken, jagged diamonds. They were almost as terrible to step on as those infernal plastic bricks, so he had made a habit of using <Force of the Hecatoncheires> to sweep his entire floor clean by simply levitating anything below a certain weight, then placing it into a bin.

As for where the trash ended up, well, Stormbraver had a rather ingenious network of purification in the sewers, making use of death-aspected mana to kill off tiny bacteria and spores and such. Then, there was fire mana to incinerate anything else.

Or, sometimes, he just asked Zyl to destroy it all.

And so, after a couple days, Mercury managed to enchant his first diamond without actually cracking it in half.

Applying his rijn as a cutting tool inside of an object was an interesting experience to say the least, and it felt a little bit like trying to squeeze his head through a too-small hole, but he managed it anyway. Largely thanks to <Sever> having virtually no restrictions on how to use it, which let him figure out how to go about it.

After all that work, he had a pretty complex network of runes etched into the gem. And it was still a network, though he did link them together at odd angles, and carved them into different orientations. But the runes themselves were all still done as if working with a flat object.

Were there three-dimensional ones? Surely, there had to be. Ah well. He'd learn about them in due time. Currently, his setup had netted him more than a level a day, so he was definitely improving rather quickly. Which made sense, given his Skills.

Though, according to Yvette, he was still not exactly great at martial arts. He watched her create an aura around her sword, but it just didn't click for him. Maybe he should ask her to use it on him someday...

Mercury shook his head. No, no. He had enough of a habit of losing legs. Only one of them was still an original, dang it, and he wanted to keep it that way.

By now, at least, most of his back legs had regrown. He was only really missing his ankles and paws, and he would be ready to walk on his own four legs again. What a day it would be.

For the moment, though, he put those thoughts aside and focussed on the diamond in front of him again. There were a hundred tiny lines inside it, refracting the light, breaking it up. The thing definitely felt more fragile than an unaltered diamond may have been, but it also did what it was meant to.

And it was meant to be a trap.

Light shone onto it, refracted off the runes, but at the same time, it was captured, replicated via a small absorption of environmental mana, and then repeated. It gave off a soft, shimmering radiance that mimicked the light source that hit it

Ah. It mimicked the *first* light source that hit it. Dang it. That left no room for Lucia's fire at all.

With a sigh, Mercury purged the mana from the enchantments. As soon as he powered them, it would be ready to capture more light.

... He'd made a camera. Damn it.

Well, not quite of course, since the way it mimicked light was more fractured, but still. Captures light, needs a dark room or the film needs to be remade... yeah, it was a camera. If he kept developing it, there was a good chance he could just make it function like a normal camera.

That could be fun, but he didn't really need to. His memory was enhanced many times over by his stats and Skills. Well, it might be fun to have mementos, though... He put it on the list of his projects. There was still so much else to do, too.

With the diamond made, though, he went on to refine the design for a few more hours until morning broke. After last time, another midnight visit didn't seem like too brilliant an idea. Plus, Iris wasn't supposed to see it before it was done, so, rather than visit at night, he just asked for Lucia specifically a few hours after dawn.

By then, he'd gone through three more iterations of the ring design and had improved it a few times over. It still needed to be kept in darkness until it was ready to go, though, so he kept it inside his inventory, depowered. Eventually, Lucia did come out to meet him, having asked Iris to make tea for them.

In that minute where she was supposed to go and "greet" him, Mercury took out his trusty, enchanted log. And, despite very vocally complaining about how horrible it was to expect it of her, Lucia did crawl into it.

The inside of Logston, whose name Mercury still smiled about, was pristine as always. He'd built a table inside it, which was a fun little project that reminded him of his Earth days when he had to buy things for the cheap during his attempts at college. It was simple stuff, since he wasn't particularly good at woodworking yet, but it was still his. He'd carved little cat faces into the chair.

Very crude ones, but he liked them.

"Hmpf," Lucia said, clearing her throat. "Well. Having endured that bit of humiliation, this better be worth it. What is it you have?" she asked.

Mercury smiled patiently, and gestured for her to walk along, taking the few steps over to little pandora. The smithy was open to the common room, though it had a sliding door of framed sapphire to keep the heat in, if needed. The sapphire was used like milky glass might be back on Earth.

They walked into the smithy, and Mercury quickly explained the diamond. "It traps light, see, but that means that the only light can be the one you want me to capture."

"What about warmth?" Lucia asked.

Mercury frowned a little. "Not this one, but I might manage for the ring. If you want it set in one."

At that, the priestess flushed a little. "Yes," she said. "I would like it set in a ring."

"Well, there you go. Now, let's get this stone done. I'll turn off the light then hand it to you, and you channel your fire into it, simple as that," he explained.

"Understood," Lucia nodded. With her acknowledgement, Mercury turned off all the lights. Then, he pressed the diamond into her open hand.

Fire blossomed like a flower. Gentle, golden light spilled from Lucia's hand, warm and bright. Mercury, now attuned to the music of <Fire> could hear it. Hear that it was those parts of it that warmed and embraced, rather than angrily destroyed. The flamer danced, sending flickering shadows all across little pandora.

The diamond glimmered and sparkled in her open hand, bathing in the soft radiance, the light wrapping and spilling around it, then flowing into the mana laced pathways. Carbon shifted and glowed as the primed enchantments activated, tiny furrows filled with fire, fed by ambient mana to keep it alive.

Glowing, flickering lines of gold began flowing through the clear stone, reflecting and sparkling off its facets. A tiny fire, trapped in the stone, retained its radiance even when the flame on Lucia's hand closed up like a flower's bud, retreating back into her palm. The stone shimmered, the glow now coming in tiny panes where the cuts of the gem reflected it.

Lucia looked at it for a long moment, then smiled. "It's beautiful," she said.

"I'm glad you like it. Is it warm?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Not at all. But the light is."

That meant it was reproducing infrared as well, most likely. "That's a good start," Mercury said. Since he'd already figured out patterns and brute force methods to transform his own mana into heat, doing so for an enchantment should also be reasonably durable.

It was a fun quirk of runic magic; the fact that it was a language meant the he could translate his own experiences into it reasonably well, now that he understood it a bit better. But the fact that it was a language also might mean that he could use runic magic to work back to the original.

Maybe he could even, say, figure out how to make spatial expansion enchantments if he studied his log enough. Another project to work on. Mercury put it into the box with all the other things he still wanted to try.

Smiling he turned to Lucia. "C'mon, let's go have tea with your girlfriend," he said.

For a moment, her smile widened, then faded as she looked at the exit. "Oh. Right. I suppose I must."

She crawled back out of the log, perhaps even more annoyed by it than when entering.

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Bit by bit, Mercury found that magic was really all about connections.

When it was an enchantment of light, it didn't resonate as much, but now that it was related to warmth? There was a resonance that pulled at him. Mercury could feel it.

Tiny string connecting it all.

<Fire> was a word. Associations, however, carried meaning. Fire was warm and bright and hot and burning and angry. It was as much necessary for life as it was dangerous. And yet, he could decide which bits of fire mattered to his magic.

He felt it resonate with his understanding of thermal energy more than anything. The patterns he had used to transform his mana, make it into magical energy, and then use that energy to warm something up. The way he had warmed the carriage when he first travelled with Lucia.

And that same resonance stretched through the rest of his status. <Warmed Up>, an ability made to help him expand his stamina more quickly, was one of warmth. <Tempered Body> smelled of ash and steel.

But those associations were, at the end of the day, just loose connections. He felt the threads linking them together, the bare bits of understanding that allowed him to interact with fundamental forces of the world. That let him cast magic, but they were loose. He could pick and choose.

So, there was a different binding thread. He knew there had to be one, but he couldn't quite find it. When he sank into ihn'ar to meditate on it, he felt himself brush up against the third veil again. That fundamental blockage that he knew was there, but he couldn't quite break.

Grumbling about it, he kept trying to enchant different rings.

This time, Yasashiku didn't provide the product, so he had to make them himself. He'd asked Lucia what she wanted, and it was complicated. First, she wanted interwoven strands of copper, tin and iron, which he told her was not happening because it would be an absolute nightmare to put together, not to mention enchant.

In the end, they settled on a much simpler, silver ring, which Mercury was more than happy with. Silver seemed to resonate both with <Metal> and his <Grief>, for some reason. It meant that he could shape it more easily than steel, even if the softness of the metal gave him some trouble at first.

But, after some time, he managed to engrave runes on the inside of the ring that would let it capture warmth. This time, he had to be a little more clever in how he applied them, though, since keeping it in an absolute zero environment before exposing it to Lucia's flame was likely impossible.

Instead, he used a series of mana gates that he learned from making light switches, of all things, to be able to activate the enchantment. Hopefully, that'd work. For good measure he also made a version of it that had the runes on the outside.

When he finished the finicky work that was socketing the gemstone in place, he took a breath of relief. His crafting skills had both levelled up once more, and eventually fused. It happened automatically, as these skills generally seemed to work.

[<Apprentice Crafting lv. 10> and <Apprentice Runecarving lv. 10> have evolutionarily fused into <Magical Metallurgy lv. 1>!]

Functionally, it was better than either of the Skills. He could now see the natural flow of mana in a workpiece, and the way that the runes altered it, making the pinpointing of patterns easier, and letting him analyze the properties of magical metals just by eyeballing them.

He gave a soft sigh. Despite the achievement, he felt conflicted. That enlightenment felt so close, yet he just couldn't quite reach it. He wanted to, though. He really wanted to.

Of course, the fact that he "wanted" it didn't make the veil budge. Still, he was figuring out where its edges lay, bit by bit. It was just a matter of time, as it always was. And time continued to pass.

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Iris loved the gift. Lucia had to be very clear that it wasn't a proposal, to which Avery mischievously noted that it wasn't a proposal yet.

In response, the ex-assassin got on one knee and pulled out a ring of her own.

Mercury knew it, of course, because Yasashiku had made him forge it as a "practice piece". The mopaaw eyed the sneaky old bastard with an expression somewhere between surprise, happiness and begrudging amusement, and his crafting teacher simply smiled behind the mask, even having the audacity to shoot him a cheeky wink.

The crafty - pun intended - old bastard. Mercury shook his head, then let the two women have their moment, clapping his ghost hands as Lucia went stiff as a statue. Then, she fell into her girlfriend's arms, and accepted.

Public proposals were truly troublesome, Mercury noted. But, well, after *getting* a ring, Iris must've been pretty sure that the answer was a yes. So, perhaps she was willing to take the risk of the trouble. Or maybe they'd discussed it beforehand.

Whatever the case, the two seemed pretty happy, and Mercury let them have their moment. Zyl seemed greatly amused by it, and with a muted thundercrack, Otto showed up to congratulate them as well, pulling both women into big hugs.

Then, they celebrated.

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The next day, a mildly hungover Mercury got to greet Gorm Gorm from the city council at his doorstep. <Hydration> activated, and very rapidly, he flushed all the trouble out of his system, but for just about half a second, his face must've looked rather amusing.

"Good morning, councilman," Mercury greeted the oldie. "How may I help you today?"

Gorm rubbed his impressive mustache, his expression inscrutable behind his eyebrows. "Why, young man, I believe you may be able to. Do you, at all, know why yet another walking disaster is in our city?"

Mercury looked behind him, finding Otto passed out on the floor of the kitchen with an arm around Marcel's shoulder. Avery peacefully hung in a makeshift hammock Mercury had

woven from his own <Thread>, comforted by the Blanket of Dreams, which he had 'stolen' from Mercury.

He turned back to the councilman, his lips pressed together to make a wide line. "... Oops?"

The old man gave a long sigh, muttering about kids these days. "Now, young man, I'll need to ask you to please try and bring a little less trouble to the city, otherwise we will have to discuss banning you."

At that, Mercury looked at the old man, holding back a burst of laughter, mostly successfully. A small snort did escape his nose, though. "Pfffffft. Really, now?"

"Yes," Gorm said, nodding gravely. "We are yet recovering from war, and such uproar is... difficult. The bishop Nemo has also complained of you."

Slowly, Mercury's face tilted into a frown. "Really, now?" he asked. "Has the bishop given you much trouble?"

At that, the old man's eyebrows knitted together, face scrunched up with displeasure. "Why, not that I would know. All we received was a single complaint about a lightning bolt in the middle of the day."

"Hmmm," Mercury hummed. That seemed reasonable enough, at least. "I appreciate your visit, councilman, but I would ask you to be a little less troubled about these matters. None of us want to seem ungrateful, but the truth is that we live in this city like everyone else. I understand that sometimes there is some ruckus, but no more than any other."

With a tap of his cane, Gorm Gorm shook his head. "What we fear is not what you have done, it is what you could do."

"Then it should be in your best interest to appease us, yes?"

"Of course," the councilman nodded. "Why else would I be speaking with you?"

Mercury gave a long sigh. "I see."

"I am glad you do, young man. Thank you for at least hearing us out. In the future, please do use the city gates? They are there for a reason. Ah, but with that, I shall be off. Much administration to do," the geezer said, then turning around and walking away with rhythmic taps of his cane.

Again, Mercury sighed. He'd never gotten along with old people. Or government employees.

The city council did a fine job managing Stormbraver, but they really kept everything... mundane.

"Boring, don't'cha think?" Avery asked, quietly enough for Mercury to only barely hear it over Otto's snoring.

Mercury smiled a little. "Aren't you always on about keeping the city safe, Avery?"

"Kahaha. That's my job, man. Of course I keep it safe. But there's a difference between safe and stifling, y'know? Why do you level up, Mercury?" he asked.

"So I can be free," he answered without hesitation.

Avery smiled, looking at the ceiling. "Exactly. To be free." He scratched the back of his head with a hand. "And then some old fart comes along and says you gotta use the gate and go through extra procedure 'cuz you're higher level. Ain't that stupid?"

"I do get it," Mercury said. "But it's frustrating."

"Yeah," Avery said. "It drives away powerful people, y'know. The type of people most places would be glad to have around. Zyl grew a whole city around a little mansion of his, cuz the people knew he'd look out for them."

"Power should only be had by trustworthy people," Mercury said with a sigh. "But it isn't. And that, in and of itself, is sad."

"Yep. Wanting to hurt people will give just as much levels as wanting to help 'em. And, well, combat skills usually grow in combat." He gestured at the room. "All of us got some skeletons in our closets. Well, except Marcel maybe. Maybe."

Mercury sighed. The system, in its ways of enabling desire indiscriminately, caused problems. Even institutionally distributed power was troublesome, after all. Could Mercury just strongarm the council into letting them do whatever they wanted? Sure. But he didn't wanna use Zyl's name to threaten them, and his own exploits were more impressive in other realms than on the mortal plane.

Gently, he closed his eyes, taking a few minutes. He liked Stormbraver. It had, in many ways, become his home. He should visit Kittra again soon, too, but this place was his in so many ways. Which meant that he didn't wanna lose it.

The ethics of power were truly messy.

“Got any advice for me?” he asked Avery.

“Sure,” the guild master nodded. “Time is the biggest one, really. They let you get away with stuff if you don’t do any harm for longer. I’m strong, but I can do whatever I want, cuz people know me. Raise your fame up a bit more. Show your truth to the people.” He smiled, gently. “Show them that you’re a cool critter.”

Mercury smiled at that. It was really rather simple, but at the end of the day, bending the rules was always a matter of trust. Mercury knew what he was about. “Thanks, Avery,” he said. Perhaps it was time he’d show off his <Truth> to the people of Stormbraver as well.