

Chapter 207: No More Nails Surely

Finally, Mercury reached the end of his notifications, with a small string of things left.

[Level Up!]

[Level Up!]

[Level Up!]

Somehow, despite not killing anything or anyone, he had gained levels. That... was reasonable, to some degree. He knew the system responded to desires after all, and he had really, really wanted to just go home after it all. But still, three full levels?

[The desire to survive is a major component in battle experience rewards. Due to the individual surviving a dangerous situation, additional experience was granted. Experience based on killing is not fully necessary to advance.]

Ah. That was... honestly fair. If advancing further took greater and greater amounts of murder, that would be rather bad for overall population sizes. Plus, people who advanced further, generally would also have some Skills related to their understanding of the world and the future they wanted to pursue - he certainly had them.

Those probably provided boosts to experience gained from “following your dreams” so to speak. Mercury smiled. He’d happily take it.

From the levels, he gained 30 ability points that were automatically attributed. 14 of which went to willpower, 12 to luck, and 4 to wisdom. Which... seemed about right for what he’d pulled off at the end of his excursion into the fae realm, yeah. That had certainly been something.

His world points had also increased quite a bit, rising to just shy of 3000. By now, he could make a reasonable dent in some fame leaderboard if he wanted to. That gave him an idea, actually.

Yep. Checking the regional leaderboards for the fae realms, he was up there. Not in the top ten, which was exclusively held by the rulers of the court, but rather high still. Spot 16. He was the 16th famous person in the fae realm.

Having so many rulers and high rank fae interested in him probably contributed to it, huh. Mercury smiled a little, then dismissed the menu again. Not yet. He wouldn’t deal with that yet. The fae realm could wait another few days.

And so, Mercury spent the rest of the day resting.

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When morning came, he was woken up by golden rays of sunlight on his furs. He hadn't exactly needed to sleep but done so anyway. It still helped recover far faster than usual, after all.

Stretching, he felt his muscles soften and adapt to being in use again. He smirked. <Adaptable> was truly an incredible Skill for general healthy living. So was <Nutritional Preservation>.

Given the effects of those Skills, Mercury once again briefly wondered how old he would grow. With <Seeker of Secrets> being so high level, he could probably ask Appy about his life expectancy... but did he really wanna know? Well, maybe a little.

[A common mopaaw usually dies of old age at around 15-20 years. A Zetraspa tends to live until 25. No data gathered for unique evolutions: "Leyfal" and "Srytfyel". Estimation impossible due to Skills.]

Right, then. Estimation impossible. Less helpful than he assumed, but the general trend seemed to be going upwards. So, he probably had lots of time left, given that and his Skills keeping him in good health. Also, his vitality was rather high.

If he was ever feeling the effects of old age, couldn't he just put another hundred points into the stat? What a funny thought. For now, he discarded all that and focussed on the present.

Gingerly, he hopped off the soft bed, stumbling a bit as he landed, having dismissed the prosthesis overnight. The sun was a little past rising outside, so it was early, but not abhorrently so. Mercury left Zyl to sleep a little longer. The dragon was a bit worn out from having fought the rulers for so long.

Plus, he had things to do, didn't he? Really, there was a specific old man whom he should be annoying...

So, after grabbing a quick snack downstairs, Mercury summoned the Dream of Starvation to help him walk, and started making his way towards the smithy. It wasn't exactly hard finding his way, given the persistent ringing of the hammer.

Well. The ringing was quiet, given the noise dampening enchantments, but with <Enhanced Hearing>, Mercury could still follow it somewhat easily. Not long after, he arrived.

Yasashiku was standing over the anvil outside, banging his hammer against a glowing, red hot piece of metal. The rhythmic smashing got quite a bit louder once Mercury came within the noise suppression wards, but he didn't mind it. Really, he was quite used to the sound by now.

While his teacher was working, Mercury decided to simply wait for a bit. Interrupting the old man would have been rude, and he could learn something just by watching, so that is what he did.

Over and over the hammer came down, rebounding back up, before being brought back down in force. The metal blank bent a little each time; a little more than it should have strictly from the power of the blow. It seemed to almost flow into the shape it was meant to assume.

After some time, Yasashiku flipped the metal, hammered the other side some more, then reheated it in the forge. Mercury just watched.

At some point, he was reasonably sure the old man had noticed him, but he continued hammering anyway, so Mercury continued to spectate. As the steel changed, it slowly, bit by bit, stretched into a more complex shape.

How the old man managed to make it out of a single blank was beyond Mercury. At some point it felt like additional metal was just flowing out of nowhere, Yasashiku's brows furrowed in concentration. The steel bent and contorted, growing thin, and hollow, then filling with multilayered engravings.

The blank turned into a cylindrical tube, then a second, smaller tube, infinitely thin took shape within. Then a third, and a fourth, and a fifth. Runes spawned over them, covering each bit of surface area that was created.

Then, the construct of multilayered cylinders shifted, and grew, turning into the outline of a cube. From the corners, more of the cylinder grew, making a second, smaller cube in the centre.

Mercury noted that all the metal, inside and out, was fully covered in runic script. He had never seen it applied so densely. Mana flooded from Yasashiku into the workpiece. The magic hummed in the air. Mercury could almost hear it resonate, despite knowing it was probably soundless.

Still, the magic sung to him. He listened intently, trying to figure out what it was whispering. It felt like he was on the precipice of understanding... but then the cube quieted down.

The magic sunk into the grooves, the powerful aura being absorbed into the steel. It shone with a dull grey, darker than most metals. Mercury admired it for a moment before Yasashiku spoke.

"It's a container," the old man said. "Guild Master Raventhorn-san commissioned it. The mage. You're acquainted, I believe?"

"We are," Mercury nodded. "Container for what?"

Yasashiku smiled faintly. "Magic," he said simply. "Go on. Try it."

"I don't even know how it works," the mopaaw noted.

The old man's smile widened. "Then get learning, Starlight-kun." With that, he carelessly tossed the tesseract framework at his student.

Of course, Mercury caught it out of the air with <Force of the Hecatoncheires>. However, he did instantly feel a difference in the Skill. The little cube felt *heavy*. Unbelievably heavy for its size. It was hard to make it move at all. Even getting it to fall was troublesome.

Still, Mercury was able to overpower that resistance and levitate the thing in front of him. From close up, he could see a shimmer of energy having gathered in the middle. Rather

than distributed as a cloud or anything, it looked like a solid sheet of translucent, blueish crystal at the bottom of the inner, smaller cube.

“Huh,” Mercury noted. He cast an ice spell on the cube, feeling the mana drain of him, and a new layer of crystal grew, this one cold and dim. Strangely, even though Mercury *knew* it was cold, he didn’t feel any cold radiate off of the cube, all that potential - or anti-potential? - trapped within it.

He stared at it. “Huh,” he said again. “It’s a little like... an artificial core.”

Yasashiku hummed. “In some ways. What makes it different?”

“The mana is solid.”

“Sure. Is that all? Can mana in cores not solidify?” Yasashiku asked.

Mercury gave a small frown. If he remembered correctly, <Heightened Mana Regeneration> did have a clause about that, didn’t it? That it would help him form mana crystals.

[<Heightened Mana Regeneration>: Aids the individual in condensing gaseous mana back into liquid form. Mana within the core will absorb magical energy much more quickly, and return to liquid form sooner. Also allows for easier creation of mana crystals.]

Yeah, there it was. Solid mana within cores was clearly possible. Mercury visualized his core for a moment. It was not even close to full. But clearly, there had to be some benefit to solid mana.

Magical energy was released when mana went from liquid to gaseous - in other words, it happened during the phase transition. So, if he could transition from solid to liquid, then to gas, wouldn’t that essentially double his mana capacity?

Huh. Something to definitely explore later. He certainly hadn’t made use of mana as much as he could have. There were lots of things he wanted to learn, and he’d still get to them all. Iln’ar clearly also didn’t need to be on its own. <Ancient Shadowweaving> was a fusion of his understanding and magic, after all.

Yasashiku nudged him. “Focus, please.”

Right. Mercury looked at the cube again. It stored solid mana, exclusively. “Can it be taken out?”

“No,” the old man shook his head. “It’ll sublimate instantly, then disappear into the air.”

Hmm. How strange. “It can feed runic arrays, then?”

“Certainly,” Yasashiku nodded. “So can cores.”

“Cores passively draw in magic from the air and convert it into usable mana.”

The older man shrugged. “So can this. It’ll make more of the most recent type in it. It’s slower, though. Some magic is used up to keep the containment going.”

“Is it that it can store multiple types of mana?”

“If the grade of a core is high enough, you *could* achieve that too,” Yasashiku said. “But it’s a good start. Yes, reasonably, most cores won’t be able to accept foreign mana.”

Ah. Mercury got it. “It’s tougher.”

Yasashiku smiled again. “How so?”

“Cores can’t take external mana well. They’re fragile. Volatile if they break. This absorbs any mana thrown at it, doesn’t it? That would make it much more resistant to attacks of all kinds.”

The old man nodded. “So it’s more suitable for use in volatile environments. It can also be used to clean up magic leaks, or draw dangerous magic from the air, making it more effective as a filter.”

Mercury tilted his head. “Then why aren’t we using more of them?”

Yasashiku picked up the tesseract. “Because they’re expensive. Cores are doable. You go into the nearest archway, kill a few things, and tear out their cores. Metals like these, thought? You need skill to harvest them. Skill to refine them. System specific Skills to even make one of these. It’s labour intensive.”

“Right, that makes sense.” Mercury said.

The blacksmith tossed the cube up and down in his right hand. “There are infinite ways to solve any problem, Mercury-kun. It’s about finding the one that suits you best. This?” He caught the mana battery. “It doesn’t even suit me. But it does suit Raventhorn-san.”

“And what suits me?” Mercury asked.

“How would I know?” the old man grumbled. “You know yourself best. Figure it out.”

Mercury smirked. He’d missed the grouchy old man. “Hey, I picked up some raw materials while I was out. Would you want to see?”

When Yasashiku nodded, Mercury got his log out, and started presenting the items. [Storm Wyvern Bones], [Storm Wyvern Jerky], [Sinister Cloudmatter], [Arc Fuel], and [Solidified Mana]. He kept the [Memory of Ash] and the [Hunter’s Token] in his inventory. Those seemed like important “bailout” type items to keep.

Especially since the memory might auto-activate if he died. Well, not that he was very keen on chancing that. But it was an option!

Even without that, though, he saw Yasashiku’s eyes widen. “Stunning,” the blacksmith said, running his finger across the wyvern bones. “Simply stunning. How did you get this?”

“There was a treasure hunt and I swayed the odds a little in my favour,” Mercury said with a succinct smile.

"I see. Well, you've certainly brought this old man a boon. I can craft you some mighty fine things with this - and we'll still have enough leftover for you to practice on," he noted.

Mercury shivered a little. "You... you're not planning on having me make nails from the wyvern bones, are you...?"

Yasashiku guffawed at that. "Kukukukuku! No, no. I don't plan on doing so. The nails are good practice. They teach you the importance of perfection and a lot of basic skills. You get familiar with the metal. Learn to make enough nails and you can build yourself a house, and all that. But no, not from these..."

He traced the bones again. "I reckon these would be suitable to make javelins out of. Size is about right. You could practice your runecarving on them. And with your evolved <Telekinesis>..."

It was even better than Yasashiku realized, actually, Mercury noted. <Force of the Hecatoncheires> was recognized by the system as both a force application Skill, as well as one that manifested hands, specifically. So, he could trigger <Throw> with it. And <Dash>.

The javelins were going to be a *menace*. "That sounds great," Mercury said with a smile. His mentor nodded, then moved over a step to the jerky.

"This," he pointed out, "is just food. Eat it."

That was a reasonable assessment, so Mercury took it back into his inventory. Instead, he watched as Yasashiku moved on to the [Sinister Cloudmatter].

Actually, Mercury hadn't even appraised it yet. It was a soft ball of greyish, well, cloud, that seemed to hover just a bit above the floor, with purple flashes of light crawling through it at terribly slow speeds.

[<Sinister Cloudmatter>: This material has been used to create a golem. It is soft, but charged with corruption. Utilizing it will require an affinity to the element or purging it. Can easily take many shapes.]

Yasashiku stroked his chin in thought. "Hmmmm. I have not seen anything like it quite yet, but it does look workable to my Skills. What do you say, Mercury? Any idea what you would want to make from it?"

He thought for a moment, remembering his fight with the golem. Somehow, it had been heavy despite being made from this stuff. So, it could change its weight, then? He thought some more. It would be good to have some way to control it, but what would you make of clouds?

"A scarf?" he suggested.

The blacksmith hummed for a moment. Then he reached out, his hand suddenly cloaked with a thick glove. He grabbed a piece of the cloud. "Yes," he hummed again. "I suppose I could make a shawl from this. I'll see about it."

Gently, he placed the piece he'd picked up back, and the ball stuck to the rest of the cloud like a bit of cotton candy. Truly a strange thing.

With that done, they moved on to the [Arc Fuel], which Mercury hastily moved to identify.

[<Arc Fuel>: This item was once used to power an entire golem. It can be consumed to generate a prodigious amount of energy. Ideal for bombs or fueling powerful contraptions. Questionably renewable.]

The [Arc Fuel] was, luckily, contained in a small octahedron, which prevented it from immediately combusting all that energy and causing a somewhat major explosion. Seeing the octahedron was a bit of a challenge though, given just how brightly the fuel glowed inside.

It was positively radiant. "Well," Yasashiku said. "Making a renewable item out of this may be troublesome. I could build you a good bomb, though."

"I would rather not have a bomb," Mercury deadpanned.

"So I imagined," the blacksmith nodded. "Well. It doesn't say it's impossible to make renewable. I could also just use the power to crystallize some more mana for you to absorb. Otherwise, you might need to just let me tinker with it a bit. Worst case, I break it and learn from it."

Mercury shrugged. "Sounds good. I trust you." Even if nothing came of the arc fuel, he would still be getting javelins and a cloud scarf, which would probably be significantly cool. Especially given how it would suit his whole "Rainfall" theme.

"Will do. Then, while I'm working on this, you could..."

"Make more nails?" Mercury supplied.

Yasashiku smiled and shook his head. "No. Get started on absorbing that piece of solid mana. *Then* you can start making nails again," he said. Mercury stared at him for a moment, taking note of the tiny hint of a smirk. He grinned.

"Sure," Mercury said. "I'll see what I can do."

With that, he turned towards the piece of solid mana he had gotten from Misha. The frosty fae had handed it over rather easily, and the trade for it had not been much trouble either. <Seeker of Secrets> didn't find anything wrong with it, and <Intuition> didn't seem to think that Misha harboured any ill intentions towards him.

Still, despite that, he used his mana sense to test the solid crystal again. He could feel the waves of power gushing off it, like water hitting a shore. Except that he was the shore and the mana the water.

He breathed in deeply. There was something special about this material, something very intrinsically different from liquid mana. Name that it was solid - but what *made* it that?

How did it solidify? How could he solidify his own mana?

Carefully, he reached out to the crystal, then used his mind to break off a tiny piece of it. The material chipped almost easily, with a soft ringing noise, and dissipated.

Moments later, that shard of crystal reappeared in his core, where it rapidly began liquifying. It did, however, interact with the liquid. The mana seemed to coagulate, growing thicker around the solid stuff. Then, as it dissipated, the liquid grew thinner again, until it hit a uniform consistency.

So... before his mana froze, it became jelly-like. How strange.

Mercury broke off another piece of the crystal, a bit bigger, plunging it into his core.

Instantly, at the surface, that same reaction happened again. The solid mana melted away, but the liquid began to thicken. Then, for a brief moment, there was a tiny equilibrium. Mercury saw some liquid crystallise, then melt again, over and over.

He speculated it as much as he could for the brief period it was happening, then threw in another piece. He figured to make them a little bigger again. That gave him ample time to study the phenomenon, with all his <Oceanic Consciousness> working on it.

Piece by piece, he picked apart the crystal, and the mysteries of solid mana.

Then, eventually, he plunged the final piece of the crystal into his core, watching the same reaction again, gleaned a few further hints... and he was out. No more experimenting for now.

With a small sigh, Mercury let his mind return to the outside world. In front of his face, there was a notification.

[Max MP increased by 500!]

He wiped it away. His core had gone from a pond to a small lake of mana, now. He would grow it more, soon. Though he did think that Intelligence probably also made his mana a little more potent... Was there a threshold for when it would automatically solidify his whole core?

Waving the thought away, Mercury let out a small sigh. He wasn't there yet. He felt closer to that revelation, to knowing how to make solid mana happen, and he was sure that once he took that first step, it would become easier bit by bit, but he'd still need a little to make it happen.

For now, there was something else to worry about. A child sat on a stone wall nearby, dangling their legs back and forth in the air. As Mercury looked at them, they instantly reacted, a wide smile appearing on their face.

"Oh! Biso! You're focused again! And alive!" Breeze greeted him. "How amazing. Can we play a game?"