

Chapter 202: The Simplicity of Struggle

Gritting his teeth *hard*, Mercury saw blood pour from his stump. It hurt. It hurt like hell.

But he didn't make a damn peep.

Mercury stood on the fluffy ground, red lifeblood pouring out from the wound, as his Skills kicked in. <Survivor> was at the forefront of the efforts, his blood clotting faster, the bleeding slowly decreasing. He felt his vitality course through him, producing new cells, drawing on his reservoir of nutrients.

The feeling was kind of gross. His heartbeat felt way too loud, and his entire body seemed cold and hot at the same time as his whole metabolism picked up. <Adaptable> also activated, letting him regenerate faster.

It was kind of strange; he didn't have a single Skill aimed fully at regeneration, but his existing layout was capable of covering it. Even if the resulting sensations were gross and the pain burning.

A minute passed until the pain had receded to a dull throb. Mercury had not regrown his leg, not even close. The wound had scabbed over, and he could tell that there were blood vessels forming to complete the circuit where his arteries had been.

He also distantly noted an effect on his mana veins, which seemed raw and frayed where the leg had been. Maybe losing a limb was... quite the good way to unlock <Mana Expansion> or <Astral Body>. He already had those Skills though.

Shaking his head slightly, he focused again. Somehow, having lost a leg seemed not to matter too much. It could have gone worse. He'd grow it back, too, but he could still handle it for now, even though not having a prosthetic would make it rather difficult.

Three legs were workable, though. So, taking a deep breath of the cool air, Mercury hobbled forwards across the clouds.

Finding a walking rhythm took some adjusting, and he was definitely more unsteady, but he found a decent step with some trial and error. He left a small trail of red, coming from all the other tiny cuts on his body that didn't quite close instantly. But at least it was easier to focus again and look out for any landmarks.

Quite frankly, there were many. Dozens of clouds floated around him, many of them different colours and shapes, often with strange architecture on their tops or bottoms, hanging from the fluffy substance that was not at all what clouds were actually made of.

The one Mercury stood on seemed inhabited. There were little sprites flying about a bit further in from him, fluffy creatures that looked a little like sheep, with the black faces and white, fluffy bodies. Many of them seemed to be eating from trees that looked somewhat like cotton candy.

But, of course, there had to be a reason for him to be here. He wanted to get to it.

By linking <Itinerant> to <Intuition>, he could make his movement cut through the world a bit faster. Each step carried him further, closer to the destination he had set for himself. A few moments passed and he was in the middle of the forest.

For once, the sprites actually avoided him, seemingly repulsed by the blood. They seemed to be non-flesh-eating, which was a lovely change of pace. Mercury allowed himself a faint, somewhat ironic smile.

He smelled something sweet in the air, and instantly doubled down on <Rainfall> again, shutting that sensation out. Another dozen steps carried him to the end of the cotton candy woods, and the clouds beneath him darkened a little.

Then, suddenly, he was in front of a chasm in the cloud. A grey staircase, leading into thunderous depths. He could already hear the rumble, and feel the static electricity on his skin.

Despite that, he began his descent.

Hobbling down the staircase was luckily made easier by his Skills, even though the process was still awkward. Once it transitioned into a more natural slope, things became easier, until he found himself in front of a vast, dark door.

Lightning flashed along the engravings on it, and Mercury knew the smell of ozone was heavy around him, even if he shut it out. His ears rang from the constant roar of thunder, so he drew his domain tighter, keeping the air still and dulling the noise.

He breathed in, then drew on <Force of the Hecatoncheires>.

The door was massive, easily two dozen metres tall, and seemed to be made from something between soft clouds and unbreaking steel. Regardless, he felt his target behind it, so he pushed. First with a little power, then more.

When the door didn't budge, Mercury began to press the full force of his Skill against it. A dozen arms, then a hundred pushed against the door. He dug into the ridges with ephemeral nails, feeling the Skill taste its limits. The roar of thunder grew louder again, electricity arcing through the door.

Mercury threw even more of his mind behind it, fuelling the Skill with more mana as he dredged it up from his core, quickly coursing it through himself. With every bit of focus from <Oceanic Consciousness>, he shaped the force, aiming for the greatest amount of leverage he could.

Finally, once he strained with all his mind, there was a final, cloud-shaking crash, as the door opened just the tiniest bit.

Instantly, all the lightning arcing through its inscriptions condensed in the opening, striking down into the floor of the cloud Mercury stood on and dancing over it in a wave of blue-purple plasma. Mercury felt a rush of wind pass him by.

Strangely, a part of it seemed to be moving forward.

Narrowing his eyes, Mercury chased after the strange sensation, rushing through the door as quickly as he could without losing balance.

A moment later, there was that strange rush of wind again. Without hesitation, Mercury stared at it, activating <Witnessed>. If there was nothing there, he would have just wasted a bit of mana, but if there was...

The air seemed to distort, then with a tiny snapping noise, a little creature manifested from it. A snake, made from arcing electricity, like an animated bit of lightning. It seemed shaken, falling from the sky and to the ground, giving a hiss somewhere between displeasure and fear.

Mercury looked at it for a long moment, slowly seeing an aura form around it. Somehow, it had hidden from this strange sense of sight he had before. Now, though, he saw tiny threads of silver arcing away from it, in what seemed like a thin, somewhat hostile shield of nobility.

"You hid from me," Mercury stated. The snake only hissed in reply. "I know you can speak."

"I would prefer not to," it spat, its voice snappy and raspy.

"Then you should not have tried to sneak by me," Mercury replied with cold calm. He was in the fae realm, and sadly, he didn't have as much room to assume kindness here. "Why did you?"

"The door would hardly open by itself," the snake hissed indifferently. "I wanted to see what was behind it."

Mercury frowned. "You know there is treasure here."

"As if it was not obvious," the snake replied, its tone now arrogant and haughty. "Come now, who installs an enormous black door without anything valuable behind it?"

"So, you were happy to simply dart by and steal?"

The snake gave him a glare, a tongue of lightning arcing from its mouth and tasting the air. "Or what? Give up on the treasure? Face you directly? *Oh, please.* I am a minor member of my court, barely above a spirit. You could crush me the moment you detected me. I simply tried my luck."

Mercury gave the snake a longer look. It didn't seem hostile at all, simply annoyed. Like he had ruined its plan, when really, he had also brought a plan into existence at all. The little critter seemed rather irritable about that, so he didn't bring it up.

"Do you want to follow along, then?"

"What?" the snake turned to look at him, the arrogance breaking for once.

"I cannot protect you if there is danger, but I will not stop you from following. If you try to steal any treasure though, we will have to fight over it," Mercury stated, holding eye contact.

The creature shivered slightly, but seemed pleased. "Sure. I shall be bragging about adventuring with the fae realm's newest *star*, then," it said. "That reputation alone will be a boon."

"What is your name, then?" Mercury asked.

"Blitz," the snake replied.

"Alright, Blitz, don't fall behind, and stay alive," the mopaaw said.

With a quick hop, he continued journeying along the dark ground. The cavern had opened up a little, but it only illuminated with the occasional flash of lightning.

"How did you lose your leg?" Blitz asked, only a few seconds into their shared journey.

"Someone in the shadow area took it off before I could blink," Mercury replied honestly.

The snake writhed a bit at that, its form twisting through the air. "You seem to attract danger like a magnet."

Mercury regarded Blitz calmly. "It's because the rulers want to break me."

"Haah, that they would," the snake agreed, then remained silent.

For a while, they simply walked in the darkness.

Occasionally, a bolt of lightning would light up the cavern, showing their way forward. Mercury still followed the tether of <Intuition>. A few minutes into the walk, though, the feeling it gave off changed slightly.

Alongside the distant feeling of connection, Mercury felt the much more direct hum of danger.

'Of course it couldn't just be a door,' he thought, growing more wary. The thunder roared too loudly to make out any sound, and even if he let down his <Rainfall>, the smell of ozone would be overpowering. Instead, Mercury focused on what he could.

Moments ticked by, Blitz drifting slightly further ahead, when another bolt of lightning tore through the fluffy cavern, illuminating something in its center.

First, Mercury thought it may have been pillars, going from the bottom of the cavern to the ceiling, but as he looked upwards, there was a torso, and arms, as well as a head, woven from dark clouds. It was a creature.

[Sinister Cloud Golem.]

Blitz stopped in place, the moment the golem was revealed, and shivered. Mercury could tell what was going through the snake's head. Regret and fear. It simply froze, right in mid-air.

He gave a small sigh, drawing on <Veil>. He would not be able to stay hidden forever, but he would be able to stay hidden for a little while. It gave him time to think.

For a few moments, he drew upon his split minds, focusing hard. One part of himself analyzed the tether of <Intuition>. The connection was closer, now, and it seemed like it was... part of the golem. Damn.

The second analyzed this creature a bit more, focusing on what he had seen. There was no aura around it, because it was not truly sentient, he was clear on that. Golems were not sentient, after all. They did not feel suffering, simply following directions.

Maybe the ruler of Skye could have trapped a soul in there, but elected not to. This was a rather simple challenge, then. He had some ideas already...

While a battle plan formed in one of his minds, the third one focused on Blitz. Their connection was faint, but through <Witnessed>, he reached out and lightly tapped the snake with some mana, shaking it out of its stupor. Blitz quickly turned and stared at him, and Mercury slowly shook his head.

Quiet was of utmost importance.

Mercury couldn't exactly lift his final front leg to point, so instead, he used <Force of the Hecatoncheires> to gently push the snake back. Blitz seemed to get the hint, quickly slithering back through the air.

Taking a breath, Mercury focused, parts of his mind going to sleep again, the battle plan at the forefront of his mind. He channelled more mana into <Veil>, though with how many Skills he had used, it was beginning to run low. He had regenerated a bit, putting him at about half currently. It would have to do.

Silently, Mercury began to use some more of his Skills. The giant was large, and he needed to slow it down. Preferably, he would simply never engage it directly. But if it came to it, he would only start fighting after stacking his advantages.

The golem had not spotted him yet, but <Veil> would drain his mana eventually, so he needed to use his time effectively.

He triggered <Thread>, producing it from his front claws, and instantly lifting it into the air with a small application of force. But he needed it to be as unnoticeable and sturdy as possible.

Luckily, the clouds were rather helpful for that. Instead of spinning it as he usually did, he formed the thread into a cotton-candy like mass, keeping it close to the floor. It looked like just another fluffy boulder on the caver floor, really. The drain was stronger, but this way it was frankly hiding Mercury instead of making him more noticeable.

Slowly but surely, he wove himself a large spool of <Thread>. Then, once he had a large amount, he began snaking it along the ground, pushing it toward the golem slowly.

Another flash of light revealed that the giant monster had moved. It was closer to him now, but not too close yet. Mercury remained calm, moving his <Thread> forward.

[<Thread> has levelled up! <Thread lv. 3 -> 4>]

Maybe changing the colour and consistency had given him a bit of bonus mastery? He would take it.

A few more tense moments passed, and when his mana went below a quarter, Mercury stopped making more thread. Instead, he focused on moving his current amount towards the golem.

But even once he got close enough, he didn't make it touch the enormous creature. Instead, he drew it in a loop on the floor around it, like he was circling something on a piece of paper. More mana went into <Veil> as his disguise slowly was unmade.

Another flash of lightning. The golem was close. It would spot him soon.

Mercury worked faster, the fake cloud-boulder he had made unwinding at record speed. The thread was in place.

A flash. The golem was looking at him. Sparks of yellow ignited on its face.

He dropped <Veil>.

The clouds Mercury stood on shook from the golem's roar. It was like a thousand thunderclaps rolled into one. Mercury felt it shake against the tightly drawn edge of <Rainfall>, but quickly pushed it out of his mind.

He fully roused himself from sleep. Go time.

Every bit of focus he had went to <Force of the Hecatoncheires>. The massive loop of <Thread> he'd created instantly snapped up and wrapped around the monster's pillar-like legs.

The golem took a step.

Mercury saw his <Thread> stretch and buckle, but there was enough give in it to let the monster move, now. When its foot landed, the clouds shook and Mercury felt it reverberate in his body. He began moving backwards.

Another step was taken by the golem. It was massive, drawing closer rapidly. Mercury felt a bit of fear bubble up, but he remained focused.

Once it took a third step, his trap truly snapped shut.

Splitting his mind again, Mercury made one solid rij. He did not need it to be complicated. He simply needed it to be powerful, so he channelled his most powerful ystir into it. Within a moment, a thin platform appeared above where the golem wanted to step.

Its gigantic foot came down on the platform made from Mercury's mind. The impact left him reeling, and it felt like a goddamn building had just fallen onto him, but it held firm. For just a moment, Mercury bore the weight.

The other parts of his mind controlled his <Thread>.

With the golem off balance and stumbling from the sudden misstep, the loop drew closed. Rather than softly touching the golem with some give, Mercury made his thread as tight as he could. There were dozens of strands wrapped around its legs now.

Mercury's nose began bleeding from the pressure.

He drew the thread tighter when the golem stumbled.

His eyes started bleeding as he began pressing his platform *upwards*. With all the force of his main ystir, he pushed against the crushing weight, hoping to make even the slightest change.

A flash of lightning passed through the cavern, showing the giant flailing its arms. Mercury finally finished binding the <Thread> as tight as he could get it, which would confuse the golem more, making it harder to maintain balance. Then, with those bits of his mind freed up, all of <Force of the Hecatoncheires> slammed into the side of the golem, pushing it more.

The pressure finally became too much and Mercury unsummoned the platform of his rijn. Instantly, the golem's leg accelerated down, but given that it was bound to its other... The monster took itself off balance even more. It toppled, beginning to fall backwards.

Mercury smiled, helping it along.

It impacted the ground hard enough to make Mercury himself stumble, but he didn't let the chance go. Instantly, he sprinted at the thing, and jumped on it. His mana was at maybe a fifth of his total.

The Dream of Starvation wove itself into existence around his front leg, covering it up to his shoulder. With <Reinforcement Dash> and <Itinerant> he was on the golem in moments. The creature was disoriented from its stumble.

Mercury exploited the opening ruthlessly.

With <Sever>, he dug deep furrows into the thing. He bit and tore away at it, wherever <Intuition> told him to. When it reached out to grab him, he would <Dash> away, or redirect its fists with <Force>, making the golem break itself apart.

When it tried to get up, Mercury would break apart its arms. Eventually, the monstrosity ran out of steam.

He grinned. 'Seems I can still handle a physical challenge.'

[Broken a Sinister Cloud Golem. Get: 1 Exp, 1 Gold, <Sinister Cloudmatter>, <Arc Fuel>.]

[<Heightened Mana Regeneration> has levelled up! <Heightened Mana Regeneration lv. 5 -> 6>]

He quickly dropped the new items into the log, since they fit into it comfortably. Then, taking a deep breath, he turned to Blitz.

Mercury knew his mana was low, but that was fine. The snake would not betray him now, he was sure, since its jaw was on the floor, stunned. "So, does this count as enough of an adventure for you?" Mercury asked.

Quickly, the fae nodded. "Uh, y-yes! Certainly!"

"Great. I'll be off, then."

Despite his vote of confidence, Mercury did not want to stick around. This was a gauntlet created by the rulers, after all. If he rested... they would certainly send people after him. In fact, he had little doubt he was being chased. So, he would rather change the path on his own terms.

Reaching out to <Itinerant>, he left the stunned snake behind, feeling the world blur around him.

Mercury felt dizzy with the change in perspective. Then, he felt stunningly cold.

Around him was a landscape of ice and death. It was strangely clear.

No clouds in the sky. Not a single snowflake falling.

The ice the ground was made of was *stunningly* clear, looking more like blue-ish glass rather than ice itself. He could see hundreds of meters deep, and it was, indeed, as horrifying as one would expect. There were reflections of himself if he looked too far, but even before that, he could see dozens of frozen, preserved corpses.

There was, however, one living creature to welcome him.

"Misha," Mercury greeted.

The fae turned to face him, lips curled up into a slight smile. "Ah, Mercury. You have made it here." They eyed his missing leg. "Not... entirely unscathed I see."

Mercury nodded. "Well, you see, some rulers may have made their challenges slightly unfair."

"I see," Misha laid a hand on his chin. "But you live, yet. And you must carry many treasures."

"Some," Mercury shrugged. "Though I believe most are something you could get from your court."

Misha chuckled. "Indeed. Our resources are vast, if ever-depleting. Most, you say?"

“Most.”

“Would you hand over the others if I asked?” the fae asked, still smiling as politely as ever, hands now crossed behind their back.

“I would not,” Mercury said with as much of a shrug as he could muster. “You would need to work to take them from me.”

“A shame I am so averse to work, then,” the fae teased. “Well, there is another treasure here, provided by Chill. And the challenge to receive it is rather simple.”

“Oh?” Mercury asked.

Misha clapped. “Quite so! You see, our court would like to keep amicable relations with you. So, all we ask is that if you come upon another of Chill’s fae in the hunt, you do not take an action that may cause them harm.”

The mopaaw regarded the fae for a moment. “Is there a catch?” he asked.

“Well,” Misha admitted with a wave of his hand, “there are some hooks. It means you would need to use stealth if you ever risk exposing them to an enemy, and it also means that if you leaving an area would make it more dangerous for them, you may not do it. It is, in many ways, a restriction,” they explained, laying out the terms.

“Acceptable,” Mercury intoned.

“Hm?” Misha’s eyebrows rose. “I did not expect you to agree so readily. You would shackle yourself?”

The sly comment made <Unrestrained> buckle for a moment, but Mercury disregarded it. “I can accept it for a reward. Since it is temporary.” It helped that he did not expect to meet anyone else from Chill during the hunt.

Misha smiled. “Acceptable. Then, here is your reward.” They reached behind their back, pulling out a blue crystal.

[<Solidified Mana>: Dense with pure mana, an individual can absorb this crystal to increase their maximum and understand how to pack their mana more densely.]

Strong. Mercury felt the waves of mana coming from the thing, and he quickly placed it in his log. Then, he nodded at the fae. “I will be off then.”

“Indeed. I look forward to what you will do in the future, Mercury,” Misha said, still wearing that strange smile. As if everything was under their control. Mercury did not like it very much, but a step and a pull of <Itinerant>, and that was gone.

The cold was replaced with a scorching heat as he found himself surrounded by flames.

Of course, Scorch would not let themselves lack behind Chill.

An unknown fae greeted him, this time. They were made from white incandescence, a body constructed from bands of floating fire, rings stacked atop each other that would unravel into spirals, then reform at the lowest point of the body, before slowly travelling upwards like smoke rings.

"Greetings, Mercury," the unknown fae said.

"Hello, envoy of Scorch. What do you need?" he asked.

The fae kept a respectful distance, staying rather far from Mercury. Were they afraid? The melodious voice came soon. "I am here on the orders of my ruler, to offer you a trade."

"I see," Mercury nodded. "Go on, then."

Once more, the envoy paused. "Scorch has invested a great treasure for you in this hunt. It would allow you to reach far greater heights than you have before."

"And what do you want in exchange?" Mercury asked, without hesitation.

The envoy seemed strained, the rings growing smaller and tighter, compressing in on themselves. "Well, you see, our ruler has seen fit to graciously trade it for but a spark of fire..."

Mercury blinked.

The fire around him suddenly flickered for a moment, and hissing steam began rising as rain fell around him. <Still Mirror> was instantly overwhelmed with its duty.

"If you could, go ahead and specify *exactly* what you want from me," Mercury said, taking care not to hiss the words.

"Well," the envoy started. "We would like a spark of dragonfire. It has come to our attention that you may have ready access to one..."

Mercury felt his fury grow stronger. "I do not believe I do," he said, barely keeping his anger contained.

"My ruler tells me that you might want to reconsider-"

"Stop talking, right now," Mercury said. The flames flickered again. "Listen here, fucker. If there is *one thing* you don't ask me for, it's that. I would have responded better if you asked to tear my heart out of my chest. Make sure to remember this *closely*. I will murder you if you ask again."

The envoy, wisely, remained silent.

"Tell your ruler to never touch him. Never even consider trying to take it from him. If they want a spark of fire, they can get it from somewhere else. I promise that if I even hear a whisper of your court trying to take a spark of Zyl's fire, I will do my utmost to make you regret this."

"We encourage you to-" the envoy started.

Mercury snarled. "I encourage you to value your life."

Then, instead of waiting on an answer, he pulled on <Itinerant> and stepped forward.

For a moment, he smelled a calm fragrance. Of rain and falling leaves, with only a slight hint of rot. The smell of Mellow.

It was pulling on his path, his next destination as the season courts wrangled for supremacy. For just a second, he thought he saw a forest, the ground covered in colourful leaves, and the trees slowly losing them, but then that image blurred again.

Instead, a far stronger force pulled on him.

Something around the path that was laid out *broke*.

The world shattered into a hundred pieces. No longer was there anything blurring around him.

Mercury found himself in a fractured bit of space. All around him, things were wrapping in on themselves, cracks and splinters of space that showed a hundred ways forward, that were no real direction at all.

Then, there was another pull. <Unrestrained> roared at the intensity, trying to shake it off, and slightly loosening the grip, but Mercury was pulled nonetheless.

Through the broken bits of space, a new direction was formed. One that was part of the treasure hunt, one the readers did not want.

Behind the bits of broken space, Mercury saw a shattered realm. Incongruent fragments of what never could have been attached right into serene sequences of the present. It was a mangled realm, stitched together like some kind of zombie abomination. Places that should have perished held together by the sinister desire of their rulers.

And far, far off in the distance, Mercury saw a shattered throne.