

Chapter 255: People

CW: Grief, Brief mention of suicidal thoughts (2nd section of the chapter)

Humans are vain creatures.

Bael sat in her room, thinking. It was a plain room, with a single bed in it, a nightstand, a small table, and a dresser. There was a small bathroom attached, but she hadn't showered yet.

There were small rainwater stains on the floor, in the shape of her clawed feet. That human facade that cracked and crumbled away. Because, at the very truth of it, Bael wasn't human. She could act like one, she could imitate one, put on the mask and fit in, but she was not, and never would be, human.

That did not make her any less of a person.

Despite everything that was wrong with her, she did not feel particularly bad about her past actions. She felt no guilt at eating when she was hungry, at hitting things when she was angry. Was that what made her inhuman? She shook her head, and took a long breath.

This was tiresome. The charade, the back and forth, the hiding. And yet, humans were vain. To walk around with horns or demonic wings would attract all the wrong kinds of attention. She just wanted to live. Sighing, the demoness rose from the bed and took a few slow, lumbering steps to the bathroom. It had a shower. She wasn't dirty, but she could use a shower.

Storing her clothes in her inventory, Bael turned on the hot water, letting it run across her scalp, soothe her cracked skin and the mild bruises from where Avery had hit her. She'd recover quickly, especially if she ate. Which she would, probably. When the time came.

Maybe Avery would have some food for her? She paused at the thought, shaking her head. How odd was it, that she'd expect it from a human? They were vain and insular. They often kept to themselves, and few ventured outside of their territories. They valued their little families and their homes, often more than their own lives.

It was so pointless, so small. One could always build another house, but coming back to life? That simply didn't happen. She sighed softly, deciding not to rely on the guild for food. It would be easy to hunt some, to get some for herself. It would be so easy.

With a resentful sigh, she stepped out of the shower. A brief burst of infernal flame incinerated all the water still left on her body, and a quick access to her inventory brought the clothes back onto her. Her head didn't feel particularly clearer though. She sighed again, getting ready to walk outside, when-

There was a knock at the door.

It was a soft, dull sound, of knuckles rasping against wood. "Good morning," came Marcel's voice from outside. "I've brought breakfast," he said.

Bael stared at the door. It was strange, hearing him. There was no accusation in his voice. No expectation. No fear at all. Just a serene boredom.

"Hello?" he asked, after the long pause. "I'm pretty sure you're awake. If you're feeling nonverbal and want me to drop off the food in front of the door, please tap it once."

She stared some more. "No," Bael said eventually. "No, uh, come in."

A moment later the wood creaked open and Marcel did just that. He was dressed simply, in a white button-up shirt with tiny bits of golden embroidery, and a pair of simple brown pants. He placed a tray of food down on the table. It had a cup of tea, a few loaves of bread and an assortment of spreads to put on them, as well as a bowl of cereal and a small flask of white liquid.

"It's not milk," he said. "It's made from soaking beans in water. I know, it sounds kinda weird, but it's really quite nice," he said.

Bael blinked at the human. There was another long pause. "Thank you," she said, eventually, quietly.

"No prob," Marcel replied. He dragged a hand through his somewhat messy hair. "If you need something else, feel free to call. Ah, if you wanna beat someone up, call Avery instead. I don't do that."

That was funny. Bael snickered. "Yonini. I will," she said.

Then, the human's stomach growled.

She stared at him. He looked back. "You haven't eaten yet?" she asked.

He smiled awkwardly. "Was just about to grab a bite, actually. As I said, let me know if you need anything. I'll come by quickly," he said, then turned around and began walking out.

"Eat with me?" Bael asked.

Marcel looked over his shoulder at the quiet response. Then, he gave a gentle smile. The facade dropped away from him for a second. "Sure," he said. "I don't mind. Be right back," he said.

Bael watched the door shut behind him. Then she looked at her food. She didn't eat, though. She waited until Marcel got back.

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Breeze sat in the forest.

It was a quiet morning. There were clouds in the sky, but no rain, yet the grass was still wet. Birds twittered, crickets chirped, and life was all around him. The young boy who'd lived for centuries took a deep breath.

Should he kill himself?

That was the question that he thought of, legs dangling below him on a branch. It was a quiet, contemplative question. He'd hurt so many people that they'd build a wall, just to keep him out, and yet he walked back into that city.

He shouldn't even be alive. He was a reanimated corpse. He didn't remember who he was before resurrecting. That person was gone entirely. All that Breeze was was a shell. A dull husk of a person that may, at some point, have had an internal world. Wishes and desires and a life of potential.

Now, he was a murderer. A murderer destined to be forever trapped in the body of a child, with the heart of a storm.

Another deep breath. Air passed into his lungs, even though he had no need to breathe. The wind filled his chest. The soft sound of water dripping down leaves and onto the soft earth

filled his ears. The forest was alive, and it was beautiful in its own way. Breeze breathed, and thought it over, and decided to live.

No, he couldn't forgive himself. Not for now, and maybe not for a while. Breeze felt guilty. He had, without a doubt, ruined lives. He looked onto the horizon, far, far away, to that windswept hill. From where he sat, he couldn't even see it. It was that far away. A hill where a storm perpetually raged. A burial ground for people that had been taken by the wind.

People he had picked up and ran with to play, people whose bodies had snapped at the first moment of that motion. Shattered limbs laid upon windswept grass. It was a beautiful hill, he remembered. A beautiful hill where their bodies laid like broken dolls, where he had buried them in tall grass.

Slowly, Breeze sighed.

It was so human to mourn. Was it his place to mourn the people he killed? Was that disrespectful to their families? It could not be fair of him to feel sad for the wrongs he did.

Ah. Maybe it was. He sighed again, burying his head in his hands. It was so hard. Feeling was so hard. Remembering was so hard, and yet he did not want to forget for a moment.

This was his burden to bear, his unforgivable crime. The truth of the storm, the truth of the wind. Humans were so fragile, so maybe if he mourned them enough, he'd be worthy of forgiveness. Maybe, if someone forgave him, things could be alright. Never the same as before, never, but maybe alright.

After all, he had accidentally killed people he considered worth saving. People he'd wanted to be friends with. And what could be worse than killing one's own friends?

Breeze found it unforgivable. And yet, he lived on. As a husk, selfishly, hoping against hope that he might find something to fill that hole some day.

He sobbed. He cursed. He screamed his frustrations out into the world, and the wind rustled the treetops in a sudden gust. He had to do something. To move? To move.

A storm rose in the forest. It swept across Stormbraver within a moment, brushing by like a passing thought, leaving the city as it was. The wind roared through the sky brushing aside the clouds, and screaming its frustrations to the spilling sunshine. Breeze mourned, even as rays of golden light coloured the cobblestone.

He moved, he raged, and he sought solace. He had to find someone to talk to. A friend. Something, *anything*. Breeze rushed, searching, and he found who he needed to find.

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Outside of Stormbraver, Ruvah sat at the lake. His body was made from a thin sheet of ice, assuming the form of a small humanoid. The proportions were those of an adult, and yet shrunk down to a smaller size.

His feet dangled in the water of the lake. He looked up into the cloudy sky, and smelled the rain that hung in the air. It was thick with humidity, with tiny droplets of water that he couldn't quite see, and yet feel so distinctly. The air was so much closer to him than usual, he smiled.

It was a calm, beautiful day, and Ruvah was happy to do nothing more than sit at the lake.

Stagnation was death. That was still a truth. Yet, Stormbraver was one of those places, where people came and went like a river. There were always new faces to meet, new things happening. The sky would darken with rain, and then Mercury would drag some wet sop to them who needed rinsing.

Ruvah liked it. For the first time in their life there was no immediate need to seek something out. Change came to him. Change came almost naturally, almost easily. He looked at the sky, and watched the clouds part in a gust of wind, watched the surface of the lake stir at its touch.

Ripples spread across the water, in the same way they did when rain fell. All night, the water had splashed. Even now, the rivers feeding the lake, and those drawing from it, ran higher than usual.

It was funny. Ruvah was named after those rivers, and now he sat where they met with a simple lake. One that had fish living inside of it that he sometimes fished out. It was easy to make a living in Stormbraver. Just a little magic was all it took.

Help some people freeze their produce, and they happily gave Ruvah a place to stay. He didn't need much more than that. The water from the lake was more than enough food.

Still, he missed the wide, sweeping infinity he had grown up with, sometimes. The oceans were vast and unfathomable. They had currents that could drag you away into another world entirely within moments. That was not the same here in Stormbraver.

Granted, there were people here who could do that, Mercury chief among them. Ruvah knew about his inner world. They'd talked about it before. In fact, the water elemental was rather excited to meet Arber once the time was right. Hopefully sooner rather than later.

Then, the wind picked up more.

Ruvah tilted his head. The angry gale played with the crystals of ice that condensed out of the air around him, ringing them like windchimes. Tiny bell sounds that surrounded Ruvah. They seemed... sad, somehow.

He watched the wind spiral across the surface of the lake, pulling up a spray of water and leaves and grass in its wake. It trailed up into the sky, piercing the clouds, and came crashing back down, dragging a trail of condensation behind it.

Tilting his head even further, Ruvah assumed one of his favourite shapes, that of a mopaaw, and walked forwards.

The wind raged across the empty lake, no one sailing upon it yet. Water droplets scattered and flew, and the wind coursed. Underneath Ruvah's feet, the water froze, building a bridge across that water, the ice waving slightly in the wind.

Step by step, Ruvah moved closer to the heart of the gale, to where it raged. Waves bounced against the fragile surface they stood on, but that was fine. If need be, Ruvah could do a lot more than simply freeze a bridge.

So, he walked. Further and further, until one moment to the next, the gale stopped.

Instead, there was a boy.

He had short, blonde hair, that hung in the air around his head, and reddened, emerald eyes, glistening with tears. He stood there, staring at the water elemental, crying with indignation. "Come ON! Can I not be angry in peace?!" he demanded.

Ruvah found that curious. He just watched the kid, and took another step closer.

"I'll hurt you damn it!" the boy raged. "I'll- I'll-!!"

There were no words leaving his mouth. Wasn't that curious? Humans were so bizarre to Ruvah. They went on and on about what they would do and never did it. They lied so easily, it came almost as naturally as breathing. Was it so hard to be honest with oneself? Was it so hard to simply acknowledge when things weren't working?

The water elemental stepped closer, only a few steps from the boy. Somehow, the words died in the kid's throat. Ruvah watched his mouth open and close, over and over again, like a fish underwater, but not a single sound came out. What a bizarre human.

Another step, and then Ruvah heard it.

Inside the boy raged a storm.

Smiling, the elemental stepped forward again. This wasn't a human at all. How curious! There really was no boring day in Stormbraver. Listening to the howling of the winds, chilling against his icy membrane, Ruvah stepped closer yet. The child wasn't human, and yet, so very human-like.

Perhaps it was not humans who were weird. Perhaps it was just people.

Only a few steps now, the boy's face was stricken with panic. "No," he whispered. "No, you can't, you'll break. You can't, you'll die. I'll kill you. No, no," he said. He tried to step back, but he couldn't. The boy, in his own panic, was stuck.

Ruvah tilted his head the other way. He didn't particularly feel like he was going to die. The wind chimed his crystals, letting them ring as he took another step. It was cold. But also, he was made from ice, so he really did not mind too much.

When he took another step, the kid flinched and pressed his eyes shut, unwilling to see what would happen. Ruvah stepped forward again, and once more time, until he was right in front of the boy. The crystals chimed. The water elemental grew, until his feline face was level with that of the boy.

Ruvah gently tapped his snout against the boy's cheek, freezing his streaming tears.

"... Eh?" Breeze said, opening his eyes.

"Nice to meet you," Ruvah said cheerily, his voice a rumbling purr. "I'm Ruvah."

"Eh?" Breeze repeated. "You're..."

“Ruvah,” the elemental repeated.

Breeze blinked. “Not dead,” he said.

At that, the icy cat gave a snicker. “That too,” he said.

Again, the boy blinked. Then looked at the feline. The himself, hovering above the water. Ruvah took another step forward, pressing his head against the kid’s chest. Breeze blinked. It was cold. A soft, dull, numbing cold. Like fresh snowfall.

The kind that blanketed the world and turned it all a little more quiet. The kind that wrapped around the ground like a heavy blanket of stillness. Ice blossomed from the centre of the lake, water freezing in hexagonal, crystalline patterns, out from Breeze’s feet.

He breathed.

Gently, cold air entered Breeze’s lungs. Slowly, despite himself, he reached out. His hand found Ruvah’s head, feeling the facsimile of fur constructed from thin strands of ice. His hand, slowly, sank into it.

Ruvah nudged him with his head, making Breeze sit down on the sheet of ice atop the water. Somehow, the ice was soft. The giant feline laid down next to him, laying his head in the boy’s lap.

Breeze sobbed. Soft drops of water landed on the elemental’s fur and froze into ice. “I-” he stuttered, paused, sniffled. “I’m Breeze.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Breeze,” Ruvah said. “Is this usually how you say hello to people?”

At that, the boy laughed. It was a bright, wrenching whistle of a noise, and ended as soon as it started. “No,” he sobbed. “No, not usually.”

“That’s okay, too,” Ruvah said calmly. “People are unusual, after all.”

The boy cried for a long while after that.

Mercury sat in the middle of his room.

There was something to meditate on, so he had his eyes closed, and focused. There was noise outside. Windchimes and howling gales, but he ignored them for now. Not every single problem was one he could solve. In fact, his problems had a habit of delivering themselves to his doorstep. So, maybe, he'd just wait for express delivery, instead of seeking them out.

No, there was something else. Since breaking through the third veil, it had been on the tip of his tongue, metaphorically. It was... "What is it?" he asked himself.

And the <Answer> found its way there.

Mercury knew it was <Intuition>. The Skill had been with him since the very beginning, and it had never reached level seven. Because he'd been missing something. Skills capped when they were ready to evolve. Most Skills reached that naturally, just through levelling up. Not so for <Intuition>.

Now, he had the key, and the Skill was starting to look like a solved lock. Mercury breathed. He sunk into ihn'ar, letting his mind relax and expand to understand the world he found himself in. He broke the veils, the falsehoods, and found the truths behind them. He saw the interconnectedness of a fragile, irrational reality. He saw the strings, and the way they moved and shifted.

It was so vast and wide, his mind was not yet ready to view it forever, but a short glimpse was more than doable. It was all that was needed, of course. Just a glimpse, not a permanent activation.

A million strings, sinking into the ether. Linking every creature, every place, every inanimate object in an intricate tapestry of interaction. Someone breathed out and that carbon dioxide fed a plant there, and that plant would eventually be ground into a paste to cure someone else's sickness, and that person would then talk with a hundred more people.

The web was, in all meanings, infinite. Mercury himself had thousands of strings attached to him. Every door he'd ever opened, every table he'd ever set in, every blade of grass he'd listened to and every breath he'd taken. Each raindrop he conjured, each friend he made, each thing he cared about was there.

Writ into the truth of the world as clearly as his own dreams. As vivid as a sheet of gold, as legible as black ink on white paper. The connection was as much tapestry as it was a list. It was a matter of perspective, really.

And it rippled. With every action, every reaction, it rippled and spread. The vast web of strings that encompassed every single decision anyone had ever made, that encompassed every minute interaction between two things that existed, would tremor faintly with each new thing that occurred.

It resonated when Mercury breathed. It wove a string between Ruvah and Breeze as they talked. One between Bael and Marcel that thickened as they ate together. It creaked as Mercury stretched on the bed, in the way that he shifted on the mattress, in the way his fur stirred the air.

And it was beautiful.

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

[<Intuition> has met the necessary qualifications for evolution. Evolve? (700 Skill points)]

“Yes,” Mercury answered.

[Evolution confirmed. Engaging.]

There was only one option he had unlocked. And that was okay. He was almost sure he already knew what it would say.

[The individual has acquired the Skill <Tapestry> through Skill evolution!]

[<Tapestry>: Every interaction is a piece in a story, and every moment in time builds more connections. Read the strings of interaction, feel their tremors, and learn to shape them to your goals. There is no fate, there is no destiny. There is only you, the choices you make, and the destination they lead to. Choose your destination, not your destiny.]

He smiled, even as he saw the points dissolve in the wind. <Tapestry>. It was a mostly passive skill, though if he broke the white veil, there was most certainly an active component. It would let him have more agency in his fate, pulling certain connections closer, or pushing others away.

But, most of all, it gave him knowledge. Of things that were approaching, of things that might benefit him, in the same way that <Intuition> had done. After all, none of the other Skill's functionality was lost. It was simply subsumed into an even greater thing.

With his new Skill, Mercury looked at the immense web of connectivity that described everything in the entire world - multiple worlds, even - and found a single truth in it.

People, all of them, really are very silly.

He snickered at the revelation, then went downstairs to eat with Zyl. Time passed. Trouble would find him when it did, anyway, and so, for now, he simply lived. Breathed. Enjoyed the sensation of magic, and the revelation right at his pawpads.

He'd reach out and pluck the stars from the sky soon.