

Chapter 287: Perspective

Bael was a demon. He was the lord of all demons, in fact. The most gluttonous person in the world. He had eaten mountains, torn apart beasts of the depths, and gone on a rampage across the land. He had bathed in slaughter and brought a continent to its heel. He waged the eternal war against the devils, killing their primarchs, making deals when it suited him. He was the demon king, the ultimate scourge of all things righteous, and a bestial, cruel monster.

He was also very upset when a buzzing in his ear interrupted his dinner date with his boyfriend and his boyfriend's girlfriend.

Scratching at his ear, Bael frowned. He pinched the scales there, feeling confused and disorientated. Something was tugging at him, asking him to move and go somewhere. It wasn't terribly hard to resist - more a request than a force, but it did buzz unpleasantly in the back of his mind. He had cooked, too.

The hungriest demon in the entire world had cooked for two humans.

Kaga and Marcel sat in front of him, on a soft piece of cloth he had rolled out for them. A 'picnic blanket', Marcel had called it. It wasn't quite that, but it was close enough, so Bael easily let it go. He had placed a meal in front of them, made from bits of vegetables and meat he had stored in his treasury, delicacies collected over decades. And they had just begun eating.

"What's wrong?" Marcel asked. Of course he did - the clerk was terrifyingly perceptive when it came to other sapient beings.

Bael put on a smile for him. "Nothing, Marcel, do not worry," he hummed, instead placing another delicacy in front of the human. "Eat, please."

Marcel frowned faintly. "You're trying to distract me because you don't want your discomfort to disrupt this meal," he stated simply. Bael winced slightly, which made the receptionist grin victoriously. "Got it in one. Alright, what's bothering you."

"Really, it's nothing, I-"

Kaga rolled her eyes. In a single, swift motion, she pointed the blade of her naginata at the demon's throat. Bael felt a shiver run down his back. "Just spit it out," she said, shoving a sandwich into her mouth. "Or he's gonna say he won't eat or somethin'."

With a slow motion, the king of all demons turned to Marcel. The human just gave him a small smirk, the kind one might give a silly child. Bael sighed loudly, then shook his head. "Fine, then. I feel a pull to move eastward, somehow."

"Huh," Marcel said. "Odd, isn't it. I don't. What could it be?" Almost smugly, he turned his head upwards.

And, of course, then he felt the tug, too. To the east, towards a specific location there, as if the world itself was beckoning them. Kaga frowned as the pull invited her, too. Somehow, like an infection, it had spread to the entirety of their dinner-date, now that Bael had brought it up.

"Who the heck would-" Marcel started, then interrupted himself with a smack in the face. Chuckling, then laughing out loud, he dragged his palm over his lips. "Haha. Of course it's him. Who else. Who else would it be?"

Kaga tilted her head. "Him? Who's he?" she asked, grinning ear-to-ear, as if expecting to be told to cut someone down.

"Mercury," Marcel said. "It can't be anyone else. No way no how, anytime something weird happens in my life it's either him or Avery." The receptionist chuckled. "Fine, you oversized furball. We'll head on east. Let me have dinner, now, dang it!" Marcel said to the air.

There was no reply, but the buzzing in Bael's ears did quietly fade away. The king of demons blinked.

Once again, this mundane human had instantly resolved a problem that seemed so troublesome to him. That he could only think to resolve with violence. How strange, how bizarre.

The demon offered another sandwich, and with a smile and a nod, Marcel dug in.

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When Su ShouFan went to pick up her student for a page, she was expecting many things. There was a chance that Pali had eaten him, leaving behind but a paltry skeleton of bones, cracked open and marrow extracted. There was a chance that he had mastered her techniques and begun eating people. She had been prepared to educate him in such a case, to temper his spirit.

She had even been prepared for the man to have been turned into an entirely bloodthirsty monster beyond salvation. If she had to put him down, then she was coming prepared for a fight. Her loose sleeve fluttered in the wind. Mutilation was sent after cannibalism with clear purpose - if he was, in fact, influenced by the mental aspects of Pali's technique, then she would be the best at teaching him to calm those... or put him down like a dog.

What she had *not* expected was to find the man chewing on a month's supply of spirit stones.

"Wh-what is this?" Su ShouFan asked, softly floating down from the sky.

"Oh, hi auntie Su!" Pali yelled as a greeting, happily waving. The girl sat in the lap of an enormous demon. Purple, leather skin stretched over muscle, solid as steel. Four arms adorned the beast's upper body, two maws stretched across its bestial face, underneath six eyes. Blackened horns poked from its head, like spears challenging the heavens.

The monster turned to face Su ShouFan and tilted its head. "Mercury," it spoke, its voice rough and raw, "is this one of the other peak masters you mentioned?" Power rolled from the monstium in waves, power and *hunger*.

Su ShouFan felt it. Like staring at a bottomless abyss, like starving for an age, as if it was made from nothing but bones and skin, desperately demanding even a single bite of meat.

And yet, when Mercury looked up, smiled and waved, then nodded at the monstium, it simply repeated the nod. Then, gently, it clasped one fist in one hand, holding Pali steady with its other set of arms to make sure the girl didn't fall and hurt herself. With a small inclination of its head, the demon greeted her.

"Well met, peak master Su. My name is Baelzebuth, ruler of all demons." Then, opening a single eye amongst all six of them, it, no, *she*, added. "My friends call me Bael."

Next to the monster, another two humans sat. A man with blonde hair, wearing simple clothing. He was so utterly unassuming she almost missed him entirely, his presence barely even noticeable underneath that which sat next to him.

Another human and another monster. Someone Su ShouFan could not immediately make sense of. Instead of hunger, this one smelled of blood. Killing intent and bloodlust came from her as if it was second nature. There was a desire to be bathed in crimson, a desire to slaughter the entire world - purely for the fun of it.

Su ShouFan was stronger than this woman, and yet, as her feet settled on the ground, the woman dressed in dark simply clutched her naginata tighter. The weapon hummed with the same bloodthirst of the woman, and for a moment, peak master Su wondered where it was that the bloodthirst ended and the human began.

"A true demon and a demon in human skin," Su ShouFan whispered. "Acolyte Mercury, you bring odd visitors to our cult."

The veiled figure of her newest student tilted his head, then washed down rocks dust with a drink from a waterflask. "Oh, these? These are my friends. Su ShouFan, meet Bael, Marcel, and Kaga. We share a city. I wanted to invite Bael since she seemed a little similar to Pali, and I think the two can learn from each other. Her, Marcel, and Kaga have recently started dating, apparently!"

At that, the only proper human among them had the audacity to blush. This Marcel, as he was called, scratched the back of his head and coughed awkwardly. "Mercury, you can't just outright say it like that," he said. "It's more complicated than that."

"It really isn't," Kaga said with a grin.

"Yeah, it really isn't," Bael shook her head.

Mercury snickered victoriously, happy to finally have Marcel on the backfoot for once. The man was so private that even having Mercury know about his romantic affairs apparently bothered him. The sneak! Mercury grinned, and nodded. "It sounds like I got it right on, Marcel."

"You did," the two women echoed reliable, making the receptionist look like he wanted to sink into the ground.

Meanwhile, Su ShouFan simply stood and stared. "We're cultists, acolyte Mercury," she said, "yet you brought such dark spirits that even I fear my desire to ruin the world is lacking."

The man just tilted his head, then shook it. "They're good people," he said. "They're working on their issues, too. Please be patient with them." When he finished, he shoved another handful of rocks into his mouth, chewing them like hard-candies.

Grimacing at his words, the master cultivator could only shake her head. "That- None of that is why I am even here. But I will let you know that if they cause trouble, you will be held responsible. If the cult leader wished to punish you for it, I will not protect you."

Mercury snickered, then easily waved off her worries with the attitude one could only have if they'd never met the cult leader. Su ShouFan had met them. That monster that could keep the Cult of Infernal Flames in one piece.

Because the Cult didn't have ancestors. It didn't have the kind of backing that righteous sects liked to have - centuries of powerful elders in high realms, sealed away at the end of their lifespan for dire moments. The cult had one person. One singular instance of power at the very top, above the peak masters.

No ancestors, no hidden supreme elders, no primordial originators, nothing. Just the cult leader.

A small shiver crept over Su ShouFan's body at her memory of meeting that ephemeral force. At the way that the world shook when they moved. And then, she took a breath.

Air entered, then left her lungs, and with it, the memory was banished. She was a member of the cult, after all - so she didn't have to fear anything from its leader. No, instead, she should worry about her upcoming mission. Dealing with this newly minted and yet so very troublesome member.

"Well then, Mercury," she said, clasping her hands behind her back. "If that is your position, I will allow it. If you die for this, then you shall die for it. Far be it for me to decide whether you should make a mistake or not. I am simply warning you of the consequences that might spawn from this."

Despite the gravitas of her words, her student-to-be simply smiled. "That's fine," he said. "I can handle the trouble that comes my way. Don't worry about me."

Su ShouFan sighed in resignation, but nodded. "Very well. Now, your time with Pali is up. I hope you have found your practice fruitful?" she asked, tilting her head.

Mercury smiled, then. He nodded, just once. A short, decidedly confident motion. "I have."

Instead of watching him, trying to fruitlessly pry secrets from someone so guarded, Su ShouFan turned to Pali. The girl's bright expression told her far more. While they may be rivals in this contest, Su ShouFan had helped pull the young one back from monsterhood before, so they were somewhat close. "Are you happy with your student, Pali?" she asked.

"Yes, auntie Su!" the girl replied happily, jumping from the demon's lap and running up to ShouFan, bouncing excitedly. "He refused to eat meat, but he still learned, somehow! I think he likes the rocks. His boyfriend sometimes cooks them for him?"

That confused the peak master. "Cooked rocks?"

"Cooked rocks!" Pali repeated excitedly, shedding no further information on the subject. Su ShouFan was about to ask further, when a chuckle from Mercury cut her off.

"Come now," the veiled man said quietly. "Let a girl keep her secrets. You will most likely be able to tell what she has taught me when we train together, anyway."

Su ShouFan smiled faintly at that. She inclined her blind head softly. "That much is true," she said, unclasping her hands from behind her back, and reaching out with one of them. "Then, my student-to-be, will you please take my hand and follow me to my peak? There is much work we have to do, and I plan to teach you the first steps of the Reforging-Realm."

"I look forward to learning from you, teacher-to-be," Mercury said with a teasing voice. He took her offered hand, and his skin instantly began to blister and bubble underneath the morning sunlight. Su ShouFan simply listened for a moment, until he tilted his head. "Is something wrong?" Mercury asked.

The peak master withdrew her senses back into herself, feeling some shame at her prying. "No," she said, clearing her throat to cover the faint bit of embarrassment. "Let us go, then." Behind her, she heard the unfurling of leathery wings, and upon a short moment of consideration, she thought that it must be Mercury's boyfriend doing such.

What a peculiar page would be ahead of her, she wondered?

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Mercury flew to the Peak of Mutilation without much trouble. Su ShouFan's movements were graceful and measured. Her power was under tight control - entirely unlike many members of the cult he had met. Gun-Byeong's strength spilled out and ruined the environment, Pali could sometimes barely tame her hunger. And yet, this woman made it look so easy.

Her steps coolly carried her through the air, each foot falling lightly, almost as if floating. Out of anyone at the cult, perhaps she could have been a fairy, once.

Now, scars marked her features. Her blindfold obscured much of her face, and her missing arm left her sleeve fluttering in the wind. Some would consider it lost beauty, some would consider it gained. But as much as her movements spoke that she was untouched by the world, her wounds told a different tale.

"You are staring at me, Mercury," the woman noted calmly, without any heat. In fact, he detected a flicker of humor. "Ask them. It will be part of your learning."

"Where are your wounds from?" he asked.

At that, the woman seemed faintly surprised. She hummed for a moment, then returned a question. "That is what you wish to know?" she asked. "Not what has disfigured me? What has ruined me? Made me less of a woman and more of a cripple?"

Mercury frowned. "Those are ugly words."

"There are many black-hearted people out there. I've heard them and much worse."

"You don't need me to tell you this, then," Mercury said, "but I don't believe wounds make anyone lesser. To me, it simply says that you've lived. You don't need your eyes to experience the world. You don't need your arm to be a full person."

She smiled at his words, and nodded. "Many may disagree, but I am glad to hear as much. My senses are honed, despite my blindness. My arm is aided by telekinesis - a feat that comes naturally at higher cultivation. It is why I wear no prosthesis. There simply is no need."

"So, then, would you answer my questions?" Mercury asked.

"I will," Su ShouFan said with a nod. "In due time. It is a personal thing, one's wounds, you see. But I will tell you piecemeal. I lost my eyes, first, to a ravenous tiger when I was young. The beast ambushed my parents' merchant caravan, our sole cultivator guard mauled in her

sleep. Then, it attacked my parents. I threw a rock, and it pounded at me, clawing out my eyes. They were sapphire, blue as the sky. Now they are ruined.”

Mercury, for a while, didn’t know what to reply to that. Any words he might have offered might seem cheap. There was no consolation, no easy way out of the fact that she had been hurt. So he decided to simply take the story as it was. “Thank you for telling me,” he said.

Again, Su ShouFan smiled faintly, and nodded. “You are good with words. Understanding. Many of the cult can learn from that. A little restraint does us much good. It is this most important lesson that I often teach,” she said.

At her words, the clouds in front of them split, too. Apparently, the woman did have a bit of a flair for dramatic timing, as the Peak of Mutilation came into view just as she finished her sentence.

It was a rough pillar of stone, and yet, it was smaller and more even than the ones before. Granite formed outcroppings with houses. Many of them had fields, rice paddies irrigated by streams that came from a great glacier-lake at the top of the mountain. Ice cold water streamed down the side of the mountain, shaping faint streams and roaring waterfalls.

To the best of Mercury’s ability, he would have described the mountain as... surprisingly liveable.

He saw people on it, too. Working the fields, living in houses - some built into the mountain, some clinging to the walls with stilts and foundations, and others built on outcroppings. Ramps and bridges trespassed the wild stone, shaping it into something that was almost habitable, almost oddly accessible.

People crawled all over the mountain like ants. They chopped trees, grew rice, collected water, built homes, and helped each other. And then, he saw something odd for the first time. Mercury tilted his head. “Wait,” he said quietly, watching Su ShouFan’s lips twitch in amusement. “This whole mountain... is it barrier-free?”

“Oh, no,” Su ShouFan quickly disabused him of that notion with a shake of her head. “It certainly has barrier-formations, my student. But it is accessible for anyone with a disability. We have textured the walkways for those who cannot see. We have carved ramps for those who use wheelchairs. We have made tools for those with missing limbs, and you will find none better at making prostheses in these lands than us.

“The righteous look down upon those who lose parts of themselves,” she said, squeezing her hand into a fist. “They believe that this loss defines us. Reduces our worth. And while yes, it is clearly something that influences our life, it isn’t our everything. We are people, after all.” Then, she smiled. “And we fight tooth and nail for our accommodations.”

Before Mercury could answer, peak master Su began to float downwards. He watched the woman gracefully descend, her feet settling softly on the ground. It was rocky and desolate, yes, but covered in hardy weeds. Grasses and bushes that thrived despite the lack of adequate conditions, fed by water so cold it might freeze under the lightest breeze.

When Mercury followed the peak master down, he saw more than a few of the people on the mountain looking up and waving at him. Each and every single one of them, though, was mutilated in some way. Many lacked a limb or two, others wore blindfolds, some had scars covering parts of their bodies. Of course, not all of them had visible disabilities, and perhaps some were fully able-bodied, but it wasn’t something he could judge at a glance.

Peak master Su walked in front of him, while he and Zyl followed. She didn’t look back at him, simply trusting him to follow. “What I will teach you, Mercury, is to deal with sacrifice. And for that, I have a simple question for you. What are you willing to lose?”

He tilted his head. “That’s an odd question, peak master,” he said.

“Why?”

“Because this entire body is a prosthetic,” he said with a soft smile, hidden by the veil. His hands were hidden in his sleeves, where the sun couldn’t touch them.

Su ShouFan looked at him oddly. “A prosthetic?” she asked.

“Well, not quite that simple, of course. But I am not a human,” he said. “I am a mopaaw.”

The woman stopped at that. Her steady steps came to a halt, and she turned to face him. “A mopaaw?” she asked, brows furrowed in doubt.

Zyl smirked as Mercury explained. “Indeed,” the strange sorcerer said. “I usually get a lot of reactions, so I thought a humanoid shape might be better.”

“Can you prove this?” Su ShouFan asked.

Smiling softly, Mercury nodded. The first thing he did was drop the <Lie> that he used to make the pieces of him look like skin. He pulled open his robes, the Storm’s Raiment easily

gliding aside, and revealing that his upper body was, indeed, made from ice and wood and air and light.

Zyl spread his wings wide, casting a great shadow over Mercury when that facsimile of a body started to blister. Su ShouFan simply stared with wide eyes, as the strange constellation in front of her. Where pieces of earth mixed with flesh. Where bits of Mercury's body had spun and twisted to approximate a human shape.

"I could shape myself differently, too," he said slowly. "My Skill allows me to store flesh and regenerate it even while healthy, so I can shape a fully human body by now, perhaps. But it also allows me to use other materials, and wear them like my own skin."

"You're a spirit beast," she whispered.

"No," Mercury shook his head. "I am not a beast. Not one that gained sentience. I am not a human, not a beast, not a kin. I am simply Mercury, please."

For a moment, Su ShouFan stiffened. "Of course," she said, inclining her head. "I meant no offense."

"I shall take none, then," Mercury said. This was definitely the most polite person yet to call him a beast. Looking back at Zyl and smiling at the shade he provided, Mercury then proceeded to take off his hat, revealing his face.

Where he'd once been a somewhat handsome man, he was now a somewhat handsome statue. Rock and stone carved into lifelike features, eyebrows that moved, a beard carved with fine lines, and waves of hair spilling down. It was the work of a master sculptor, carved into the world.

The peak master beheld his features, and Mercury felt her spiritual sense brush over his skin. It wasn't invasive, but instead simple curiosity. "You are... even stranger than I imagined," Su ShouFan said.

"Isn't it the duty of mysterious hidden masters to be a little eccentric?" Mercury asked with a smile.

At that, the peak master actually laughed. "Shushushu! Yes, I suppose it is. You are no stranger to loss, then, I imagine?" she asked.

"I have lost my legs multiple times before, yes. I've been hurt rather badly."

She nodded. "And yet, you prevail. You find ways to live on, ways to deal with things a bit better."

Oddly enough, despite the fact that he had literally lost limbs, his first few months as a cat were still the most disabled, to Mercury. Whenever he lost limbs, he had prostheses to rely on, and magic. When he first appeared, he didn't have hands. When he wanted to move things, he had to push them, or drag them with his mouth.

But, in many ways, yes, he could relate to it. Even though none of his injuries had been permanent - mainly because of the magic that he'd learnt. But they had been long lasting, and they made it painfully clear what it was like to live with a disability. "I understand, for the most part," he agreed.

"You'll only be my student for a week, Mercury," Su ShouFan said, regarding him with new curiosity, seeing the heart of flesh beat in his chest through a ribcage made of clear ice. "So, there are a few things I would teach you, but I can tell you've already learnt restraint, and the beauty of a normal life."

"I have," he said with a smile.

"So then, for this week, I will teach you something else. I will teach you, instead of living with sacrifice, how to *thrive* with it," she said with a smile. "Now, Mercury. Tell me... how should I mutilate you?"