

Chapter 285: Meeting of Peaks

Mercury looked at the young girl, still no older than eight, hanging from his arm by her teeth. He shook his arm, and watched the girl flail like a flag in the wind, but she didn't let go. "What is up with you?"

"Peak eater of cannibalism," she provided, her mouth stuffed.

Staring at her, Mercury gave a deadpan look. She looked right back at him. Mercury withdrew the <Veil> and his inverted <Truth> from the arm, revealing it for the wood-ice thing it was. Instantly, Palisade-Girl's eyes fell. "A prosthetic?" she murmured, then promptly spat it out, landing on her feet.

"Not quite," Mercury said, reapplying the illusion of being human. By now, his natural regeneration had accumulated easily enough flesh to make himself a whole body from it, but <Assimilation> really just... didn't need him to. He could exist just fine like this.

"You should not be able to use Origin Qi with a prosthetic," Gun-Byeong, the beast of Slaughter said. "Unless it had channels carved into it, and they would need to be... heavenly."

Mercury tilted his head. "As I said. It's not a prosthetic. And I wasn't aware I would gain an audience."

"C'moon," Palisade-Girl whined. "Give me an arm to chew on already!" Somehow, despite the weirdness of her words, the little girl wore a bright smile.

"Peak master of Cannibalism, yes, I get it," Mercury said with a frown. "But also, absolutely not. I'm not feeding you my flesh."

At that, the girl had the audacity to pout. "Then I won't tell you my name."

"Alright, I'll call you Pali."

Her eyes widened. Her mouth dropped open. "H-how..." she whispered. "How did you guess it?"

Amusingly, despite the myriad of tools Mercury had to drag out information, he'd used none of them. Not <Answer>, not Appy, not <Tapestry> or ihn'ar. He'd just guessed. Pali, short for, well, Palisade-Girl. He snickered at the thought. "Lucky guess," he told her.

"Enough of this tomfoolery," an older woman said. She wore long, flowing blue-black robes. Her ice-cold eyes were hidden behind a similarly coloured blindfold, and her single remaining arm clutched a knife behind her back, long blue-white hair waving in the wind. "I am Su ShouFan, master of the peak of Mutilation. You. Who art thou?"

Mercury looked at her, and at the other gathered people. A few more peak leaders. Gun-Byeong sat close to him, the giant of a man shifting awkwardly. Zyl regarded the gathering of cultivators with an almost bored look. Mercury very gently picked Pali out of the air as she tried to chew his hair.

"Pali of Cannibalism," Su ShouFan chided, "cease your playing this moment. You represent the Cult of Infernal Flames to an outside expert. Act like it."

The little girl rolled her eyes. "And you think you'd do better? He'd never let you get this close. But me? I look harmless!" She bared her teeth as she spoke, the rows of them suddenly looking sharp and dangerous. "He sees shark's fins, but not the stingray below."

Sighing softly, Mercury placed the child down. "Are you secretly older than you look?" he asked.

"Indeed," Pali provided happily. "My cultivation art is named the-

"Do not dare give away our secrets, Pali!" Su ShouFan roared with a grimace.

"-Thousand Year Devouring Mastery. If I eat another's flesh, my age reverses. And I'm... a very hungry girl, you know?" she said, licking her lips.

"So how old are you really?" Mercury asked.

"Eleven."

He stared at the eight-year-old. Then he blinked. "Why are you eating other people at your age?"

She tilted her head. "Is that... really what you should be asking right now?"

Mercury felt the air pressure rise around him. Ancient monsters summoned up their Qi, readied themselves for what he could only describe as war. Very calmly, a small smile spread on Mercury's lips. "I'm a curious critter," he said. "Indulge me."

"We will not," Su ShouFan replied gravely. "You will answer to us-"

Interrupting her, Mercury felt a twinge of annoyance. He triggered <Answer>. A ripple spread through the air, invisible force, and Mercury breathed in the magic. He felt it vibrate in his bones, and into his throat as he opened his mouth again. "Why are you eating people at your age?"

[<Answer> has levelled up! <Answer lv. 2 -> 3>]

The question tore through all other sounds in the world. Quiet ripped outwards violently, like a shredder to all noise. Su ShouFan fell silent. The fluttering of robes quieted, the beating of hearts went noiseless. The only thing to pierce the silence was a single faint heartbeat with the sound of crackling fire, the only spot of colour in a grey world.

Pali looked at him, her eyes suddenly wide. "We were starving," she whispered. "And my mom, she said to, she said I should and I... I-"

"That's enough," Mercury said, disgusted. Colour came back to the world. The wind breathed. Kneeling in front of the young girl, he took out a piece of candy, gingerly placing it into her hand. He smiled sadly. "I apologize if I scared you."

Very slowly, she closed her fingers around the sugary sphere. Then, she shook her head, and threw the candy into her mouth wordlessly, still shaking slightly. Mercury stood back up, and stared at the floating figures, circling him. He felt their qi crackle through their bodies, felt the way their power lanced at the world.

They were strong. Unbelievably strong. Each one a monster in their own right. Prodigies like Pali, terrifying fighters like Gun-Beong, or ancient ones like Daryel had been, people who'd spent a hundred, or a thousand years perfecting their craft.

Could he beat all of them?

No.

Mercury quickly realized that he couldn't. His power had found its equal, for once. These were people on par with fey rulers, he imagined. Somewhere close to the pinnacle of strength in this world. But while he couldn't beat them, he could hurt them.

And they couldn't kill him.

Of that he was absolutely certain. Not because of his steel skin, or because he could regenerate, but because he did not need a body to live. He could eat knowledge, he could assimilate the ground, he could remake himself from nothing but a thought.

In some ways, Mercury was tempted to call himself a nightmare... which was most likely rather literal. He could invade their sleep, after all, especially if he cut them with the Dream of Starvation. He could infect them like a virus, haunt them, eat their minds, one by one.

And he did none of that.

Taking a deep breath, Mercury sat down on the ground. "Sorry again, Pali," he said gently. "I get if you're scared. That was unfair of me. I'm very, very sorry you had to go through that. I do mean this very gently, though: You shouldn't eat other people. I'd like you to meet a friend of mine, if that's alright? They went through something similar."

Her eyes glinted. The girl whispered. "Are they also hungry?" she asked.

"One of the hungriest," Mercury nodded.

A thin smile cracked the veneer of fear on Pali's face. "You're lucky I like you!" she declared haughtily. "I'll visit your friend."

Su ShouFan hung in the sky, her blindfold fixing Mercury furiously, the empty sleeve of her missing arm billowing in the wind. But her fury was tempered by her fear. She knew that this was not a trifle. That even now, with every peak master present... they were not guaranteed victory.

They were scared. A thin, tiny seedling of fear in the back of their minds. Mercury looked at the blind woman, then nodded towards the grass in front of him. "Take a seat," he said, making sure to keep the anger from his voice. "Let us talk."

"We will demand answers," the woman said through gritted teeth.

"I will explain things, if it suits me," Mercury said with a shrug. At that, some of the peak masters looked outraged, wrath twisting their ancient features. But it was a pointless anger. If they wanted to fight, they should fight already. And if they were going to talk, then they'd get down here and talk.

“Show us some face, brat!” one of the elders called, red faced, vein on his forehead, killing intent pressing down.

Mercury looked back. “I’m a polite person,” he said with a slow breath. Clouds gathered in the sky. The air began to smell of ozone. “I’m patient, too. But I don’t give respect to people who haven’t earned it.”

The old man grimaced. His qi rushed, roared. Barking dogs of apocalyptic lightning manifested behind him. The earth quaked. The sun darkened. Mercury’s veil brushed his skin as the wind picked up. “You dare?” the old man asked, dangerous and quiet.

After having just heard that these were people who let a child cannibalize other people, and *rewarded* her for it, Mercury found himself very low on patience. The righteous sects were fucked, and so was this. Everything about this was a mess. Power without control was simply... messy.

“Come down here and talk.” That was all he said.

Power bubbled in the sky. Anger flowed off the elders in tides, emotions so tangible. Bands of killing intent spilled down like murderous ribbons. Mercury sat. He focused. His Skill triggered.

<Babbling Brook>. The emotions spilled at him, and then they washed away like nothing. He took hold of his own anger... and let it go. He found it in his heart to forgive these people, even if the whole lot of them were horrible. He decided to listen first. And if any of them needed to die, he would make a calm, rational decision about it.

Something about judge, jury, and executioner, right? Mercury met the waves of coiling fury with endless calm. “Come down here and talk,” he repeated.

And, to his surprise, someone did. Su ShouFan sighed softly, and then moved. Her long hair trailed weightlessly through the air, trailing her like a bridal veil. Her feet softly touched down on the grass, and she sat. Uncaring of the dirt that would no doubt besmirch her robe. Her blindfolded eyes settled into a blank stare ahead. The knife behind her back went into its sheaths.

Protests spread through the peak masters. “You cannot be doing this,” the angry old man whispered.

“Peak master Ji BaiYun, sovereign of Devastating Storms, calm yourself,” Su ShouFan instructed. “Settle your raging heart and sit.”

Her words brooked no argument. She didn’t even look at the old man. For a brief heartbeat, the lightning tigers around him surged. Wolfhounds or destruction formed... and then vanished. The winds, having just risen, ceased. The old man, despite everything, calmed himself.

His hair, a crown of it surrounding the bald top of his head, stopped waving. His impressive beard settled down. And he landed, too.

One by one, each of the ancient monsters settled on the ground. Demonic cultivators, people driven by their dissatisfaction, settled down. Each of them decided to actually have a conversation with him.

“Will you speak with us now?” Su ShouFan of Mutilation asked.

Mercury nodded. “Sure.” He shot a glance at Zyl, telling the snickering dragon to be quiet. “What do you want?”

“Who are you?” she asked, levering a frown at him. It highlighted a scar that crossed from her cheek across her lips.

At that question, he just smiled. “My name is Mercury,” he said. “I’ve fought in the west before, and it’s my first time in the martial world. I’ve been learning.”

“And you already believe yourself ready to judge us?” Ji BaiYun, the angry old man, spat venomously. “That you know what is right and wrong? That you’re *righteous* and we’re all *cultists*?”

Mercury tilted his head. “I’m reasonably sure that the cult has upsides and downsides,” he said calmly. “The amount of dead children I’ve seen here is a downside.”

“More children die on the streets, I assure you,” another elder replied, a younger looking, almost scholarly man. He wore glasses on his face, had a gentle smile, and short, brown hair. In fact, if Mercury were to describe him, he would have called him cute and nerdy, though he did have a nasty acid-burn scar from his ear to his forehead.

“Who are you, if I may ask?”

The young man dipped his head at that. "I am Kang Tae-yoon," he replied, "peak master of Honest Treachery."

Mercury tilted his head. "I see. Do you take in many kids."

"It's one of the more peaceful peaks," the man replied with a smile. "Yes. Many of the Cult's children grow up there. Many others grow with sister Yoshida."

He gestured to an older woman, with shorter hair, whose stern face broke out into a smile. She, too, is scarred, though it's mostly her hands. Strands of grey weave through her otherwise dark hair, but her eyes still glint with intelligence. "I told you to call me Keiko, brat," she said. Then, she looked at Mercury. "Yoshida Keiko," she said. "Peak master of Fleeting Life, pleased to meet you."

"You're a doctor," Mercury noted calmly.

Keiko raised an eyebrow at that. "How did you guess?" she asked.

"The smell. Herbs and blood," he replied.

A thin smile played across her aged face, cold eyes glinting mirthfully. "I am a doctor. Life is fleeting. It is my task to know when to prolong it... and when it must end."

Mercury smiled at that. "Would you end mine?"

The smile across her lips slowly receded, like a stone sinking down a lake. She stared at him for a long moment, then nodded, a tiny motion. "If it was needed."

"When does someone need to die?" he asked. The question was not for her, it was for all of them.

Gun-Byeong grinned. "When they're strong."

"When I'm hungry!" Pali supplied.

"When they're suffering," Keiko said.

"If they're dishonest," Kang Tae-Yoon added.

"Only once they've paid penance," Su ShouFan said coldly.

"Anyone who mouths off," Ji BaiYun grunted.

“When they’re in the way,” Kuro and Shiro agreed.

Mercury looked at the gathering of peak masters around him. He nodded slowly, thinking he had a rather decent measure of them by now. He breathed in, then out. “You came here because you were worried I was breaking things, is that right?” he asked.

Su ShouFan, apparently comfortable speaking for the rest of them, nodded at that. “True.”

“I am not. I have not killed, not even hurt any of the members of the Cult. In fact, if anything, I’ve been improving your housing situation,” he said.

“You’re telling me that on top of origin qi you have advanced mastery over multiple elements *and* the knowledge required to use them to build a house?” Ji BaiYun scoffed, crossing his arms and throwing a grumpy look to the side. “No way.”

Sighing softly, Mercury summoned up his <Magic> and made a few plants around him sprout, the earth shake, and drew some metal from the ground. He raised an eyebrow. “Satisfactory?”

Suddenly with a dozen eyes on him, Ji BaiYun just shrank further into himself. He grumbled a few words, but nodded. “Beginner’s luck,” he muttered.

Mercury shook his head with exasperation, but then faced the other elders. “So, you can see, I’ve been doing my best to be civil,” he said.

“So it seems,” Kang, the deceitful scholar said with a small smile. He pushed his glasses higher up on his nose. “So, then, why have you been trampling the history of our cult?” he asked.

“Huh?” Mercury asked.

Kang spread his arms. “Look. This is the valley of Balance. It is where the lost go to contribute. You have taken purpose away from them. There’s no need for them to build or farm. You have solved-”

Keiko stomped on his foot, making the young man flinch for a moment and hiss in pain. The old doctor just stared at him as he opened his mouth to question her, and she shook her head. “Not right now,” she said. “Play your little games later.”

He had the audacity to pout at that. “Fine,” he said, not sounding very pleased.

Ji BaiYun snickered at that. "Brat can't hold himself back."

"I am, decidedly, not a brat," Kang said.

"Yes, you are."

"I'm older than you."

Su ShouFan turned to Mercury. "That's a lie," she said. "Kang is honest about when he's lying - and that's... almost always."

"I'm very honest about being a liar," Kang said with a beaming smile.

Mercury blinked. Was this cult... being held together by literally two remotely sane people? A blind woman with a thirst for vengeance and an old doctor with a penchant for euthanasia? He felt rather bad for these people.

Even worse than before, which, given the starvation, dying kids and terrible living conditions, was saying a lot. He shook his head, softly. "Alright," he interrupted them. Two of the elders were already kind of at each others' throats. "Do you have any other questions for me?" he asked.

Su ShouFan leveled him with a soft stare, made all the more confusing given that she was, again, *blind*. Then again, Mercury could also kind of passively feel the world with his qi. Each of the peak masters was a beacon through that sight. So it wasn't hard to imagine that he was also easy to spot.

"One more question," the blind woman said. "How are you so strong when you have hardly cultivated?"

Mercury smiled and shrugged. "Sorcery," he said.

Ji BaiYun's eyes instantly hardened. "Oh just great," he complained. "A sorcerer. No wonder you were so defiant. You know nothing of this world. Let this old man teach you some manners..."

When he was already rolling up his sleeves, possibly to whack Mercury over the head, Gun-Byeong held out a hand. "Hey," the beast said. "If anyone is fighting him, it's me. I wanna rip his head from his neck again. The look in his eyes was so terrifying." He said the last sentence as if it was a good thing, too.

At the threats of violence, Su ShouFan frowned and raised her aura. Qi spilled out of her, light and airy, yet it gripped onto Mercury's heart with a frosty touch. Like an icy demon's hand clutching his most precious organ.

Okay, *precious* was generous. But like, to most people a heart would surely be very important. He'd be mostly okay if it exploded, of course, but something about her power made him hesitate. Those claws of frost felt like they might do more than superficial damage.

Was this what a genuine threat from a cultivator looked like?

He drank in that knowledge. It was an ability he didn't use a lot, a somewhat neglected aspect of <Answer> that usually happened passively, but he could taste information, these days, and frankly, he should probably try it. Right now, the actions of ShouFan tasted like a genuine threat.

Gun-Byeong narrowed his eyes at her. His qi rose. Ji BaiYun's forehead-vein pulsed again. "Young missy," he said to the woman who looked about as fresh as a fossil, "I'd drop that technique if I were you."

"Senior Ji," Su ShouFan said, "I'd recommend for you to withdraw your aura, or I will have to mutilate you."

"You'll die."

She smiled. "I may," she said. "And another would pick up my mantle. Yet, you'd still be maimed."

Ji BaiYun frowned even more. Yet, in the end, he backed down. Gun-Byeong drew a massive paw back, shooting Mercury a smile and a wink. Su ShouFan settled down again, and for a little while, calm returned to the clearing.

"So," Su ShouFan started, "if you're a sorcerer, why did you come to these lands?"

Mercury smiled at that. "To find the Skyflame Monks. I'm cursed by the sun, you see?" He pulled back a piece of cloth that covered his arm, and instantly, his skin began to smoke and charr. Su ShouFan's eyes went wide.

"Cursed," she whispered. Suddenly, the atmosphere shifted.

Keiko stared at him with renewed interest, trailing her chin with aged fingers. "You're cursed, you say? Why, we're specialists in curses, even. You might have a spot here, after all."

"I'm already a disciple," Mercury proclaimed proudly. "I registered with the peak of Slaughter."

Tension instantly flooded the area. Kang Tae-Yoon turned to Gun-Byeong and frowned. "You snatched him up instantly, huh? Trying to suddenly play the factions game?"

At the very mention of factions, Mercury saw hostilities blossom between the peak masters like flowers in spring. Postures shifted, hands drifted to weapons, and eyes narrowed. Killing intent spilled forth in a tide, and he saw the absolute fragility of this balance.

Sighing softly, Mercury brought up his hands. "I'm not going to join any faction," he said. "In fact, I'll probably help you all out. To get contribution points and learn."

"Hmph," Ji BaiYun cleared his throat, giving Mercury a sneer. "Well, out of all of these, I suppose you'll need at least *one* competent teacher," he said.

And again, the atmosphere shifted. Kang, the deceitful scholar that he was, picked up on it instantly. Mercury saw a shimmer glide across his glasses, but the handsome man just smiled. "You think you're the best teacher among us? Why, I bet I can teach him my illusion techniques to far greater mastery than your lightning."

"He's already cursed," Su ShouFan interrupted. "He'll be best suited to my maiming arts."

"As if," Keiko snorted. "The man recognized a healer from smell alone. I'll teach 'im."

Pali grinned wildly at the contest. "Me too, me too! I want to teach the funny man!"

"It's a competition, then!" Gun-Byeong proclaimed happily. "We all get him for a page! And at the end, we'll see who was the best teacher!"

Mercury tilted his head. Well. This was... a bit weird, but it did quite suit a demonic cult. And it also suited him just fine.

He could spare a few pages for this.

