

Chapter 253: Baelzebuth

Bael leaned back in the wooden chair, which creaked slightly with the motion. The air in the room chilled a little, the friendly, calm atmosphere slowly growing colder. The demoness gave him a long look. "I was once the champion of gluttony," she says, slowly.

"I escaped that realm when the ash fell. When the crimson sun fucked up, and drew the ire of one of the fae rulers. You know that already, don't you?"

And Mercury did. It was Finva of Dust who'd turned that realm ashen. Before that, it must have been a place of opulence. Of banquets and extravagant meals, before it was turned into the hellscape of starvation. But even back then, when it was still opulent, those meals had to come from somewhere, and that somewhere had eventually been the fae realm.

"Yes," he said. "I know the ruler you speak of."

At that, Bael raised an eyebrow. "You know them? Curious. I don't," she shrugged, "and I don't care to know. Being free of that gilded cage is the best thing that ever happened to me. You know how rifts work, somewhat?"

Slowly, Mercury nodded. "Somewhat."

"They're tears in reality, gates to other realms. Some are permanent, something of an exchange. The other realm harvests some magic, some reality, and divers go in to clear those places out and take resources back. It's almost fair, sometimes. But rifts?" she shook her head. "Those are a one way street. Gluttony took and took and took, gorging itself, until it tried a meal too big."

"But the worst part?" she asked. "The worst part is the way those places feel. They feel like home. If you're born there, they twist your mind with a feral rage against all invaders, one that only fades once you leave. It's sticky, too, easy to reinfect you if you go back. As a champion, of course, mine was even worse." She shook her head, staring at the ceiling.

Mercury gave her a sympathetic glance. "So how did you get rid of it?"

"I didn't," she said. Then she looked at him. "It softened, but it never disappeared. For the first few years in this world, all I knew was starvation and a drive to get home. So I ate, and

ate and ate. But the way home never opened. Now, I'm grateful. I grew strong enough to ignore the pull. And, of course, one day... it disappeared."

She eyes mercury meaningfully. He'd killed the starving dream, after all. Destroyed that realm entirely, leaving nothing behind. The tapestry of this world's reality would no longer be cut up by the invasion of gluttony.

"Of course, I still get hungry," Bael said with a crooked smile. "Gluttony is a part of my nature. I can't really ever feel full. That's just how that Skill goes. They're all benefits, and to some degree, my ability to almost instantly assimilate anything I consume is powerful - but it's also annoying, so I turn it off often."

Mercury nodded. "Okay. None of that explains why you're here, though," he noted.

Bael laughed, just a little. "Yoninini. It doesn't, does it. That's because I can feel a similar pull to you. Not the same, mind you," she waved his concerns away. "Just similar. I can tell you're connected to the sins, at least."

That did make sense. He took a deep breath, gesturing for her to continue.

"After destroying gluttony, I guess wrath noticed you, too, and wanted to assimilate you. Now, given how you've changed, I'd wager wrath is dead as well. You're practically a beacon to the sins by this point," she explained. "The most tasty morsel they might see on this entire world."

"Just great," Mercury grumbled. "I want to relax, so I take down things that pester me. Now you're telling me that attracts more trouble?"

Zyl stared at him. Then, he laughed. "Sasasa! Mercury, everything you do invites more trouble," he said. "No one gets a throne just to rest on it. The demons are constantly at war with themselves and the devils. The sins are constantly trying to draw more people into their domains. The fae rulers scheme and betray each other in a balance for territory. My own brother almost killed me, just to prove his point."

By the end of the last sentence his expression turned sour. "You cannot avoid trouble, Mercury," he said. "The very gods of this place are troublemakers, I'm pretty sure. So, yes, you will inevitably attract more trouble."

At his boyfriend's frown, Zyl's expression softened, and he gently reached out. Mercury waited, and let him ruffle his fur. Zyl gave a tiny sigh, and a slight smile. "But none of your

friends mind that,” he said. “When troubles comes knocking, you help each other out. You’ve saved Iris and Yvette, you’ve saved me, you’ve saved Ruvah and Juno and Jirluc, you’ve helped out Avery and Marcel. We’ll stay with you. Even if it’s a little troublesome.”

Mercury looked at the dragon, then just nodded slowly. “Okay,” he said, the words almost catching in his throat. “Thank you.”

For a few seconds, the silence hung in the air, and the two took comfort in each other.

Then, Bael spoke again. “At any rate,” she said, “I want the sins dead.” Her declaration smacked into the air like a ringing gong.

“They’re like distant family of the thing that held my mind captive. I think most creatures trapped in there are probably too twisted to bring back. Killing them is a mercy,” she said. “It took me decades of murder to become strong enough to be who I am now, and, well...” Bael paused, flashing a bright grin of sharp teeth. “I’m still not particularly harmless or nice.”

With her words, there was another burst of chilling cold that filled the room. It felt like a hungry beast, a predator, ready to fall on Mercury and rip his flesh from his bones if it came to that. He looked at Bael, and the demoness didn’t even flinch. She just stared at him.

“We get it,” Mercury said, with a tint of annoyance.

A bright smile flashed over her face, and the cold disappeared again. “Glad to hear it!” she said cheerily. “Just needed to make sure my message rang home. You’re funny. I could almost eat you up, y’know?”

Zyl frowned, and looked at her. “Don’t threaten him,” he said.

Bael nodded, but shrugged a moment later. “I hear ya, dragon, but still. Think of the irony. Mopaaw eats realm of gluttony, avatar of gluttony ats mopaaw. It’s almost full circle, no? And, well...” she pauses, looking out of the window. “I think it might make me rather strong, too, y’know. Reclaiming a piece of myself.”

A moment passed, quietly. No one spoke. Zyl was trying to fry a hole through the demoness with just his eyes, Mercury looked at his boyfriend with a sad kinda sympathy, and Bael simply stared out of the window.

The day outside looked like it had gone dreary, clouds covering the sky now. Maybe it would rain soon.

"But I won't," Bael said with a sigh. She looked at Mercury, and her eyes went from the manic glint to something a lot more sombre. "I won't. Because, frankly, that part can rot in hell."

Mercury looked back at her, his eyes neutral and calm. He nodded. "That's fine," he said. "Though you should know I could probably give it back."

She raised an eyebrow. "Huh?"

"I can do, eh... let's call it *treatments* on the underlying nature of a creature," Mercury said. "I can probably cut your connection to the sins. Or fill that missing piece in, if that's what you want," he offered.

At that, the demoness scoffed. "Yeah right," she said. "And why would you do that, huh? 'Cuz you're so charitable?"

He tilted his head, then smiled. "Exactly," he replied. "Because I'm charitable. And there's no reason for me not to."

She blinked. "I took a bite out of your boyfriend," she said.

"It wasn't *that* bad," Zyl said, rubbing his shoulder. "Pretty standard injury for a fight, really."

Mercury laughed at their antics. "It's just an offer," he said. "I know it takes a lot of trust. I won't force you. I'll probably kill the rest of the sins, anyway, so maybe that'll solve it."

Again, Bael blinked. Then, she laughed again, a coarse, grinding laugh. "Yoninini! You say it so easily. You'll kill all the sins? Free everyone inside? Like it's that easy?"

"Yes," Mercury said. "Not easy, but... simple, I guess."

She raised her eyebrow even higher. "Simple? You call closing holes in reality 'simple'? Weirdo."

Sighing softly, Mercury looked at her. What an exhausting conversation. "Everyone has different strengths," he said. "I can't liquify mountains. I can't summon meteors. I can't kick as hard as Avery, or swing a sword like Yvette," he said. "But I'm good at dealing with reality, yeah."

Bael looked at him for a long, quiet moment. Her excuses were being dismantled, one by one. There was something profoundly annoying with this mopaaw. And that was his unrelenting honesty.

Every sentence he spoke, she knew he wasn't lying. That he believed everything he said. That, to him, killing the sins was just a matter of time. Like it was inevitable. As if they wouldn't tear him into a thousand pieces and throw him to the curb.

He believed he could just fight them. Wipe them away like a mildly bothersome stain on a window, rather than the scourge on reality they were. As if it was a simple task that he just needed to focus on.

And somehow, she believed him, just a little bit.

The ruler of all demons let out a long, suffering sigh. She leaned even further back, making the wood creak a little more. This house was too comfortable for housing two such monsters. Didn't people like this live in opulent palaces or giant mansions on hilltops?

Here they were, in a simple wooden cottage that they made themselves. It probably wasn't even up to building code, dang it. It pissed her off. The fact that they had it so calm, so easy, it really pissed her off damn it.

"No," she said, sucking in a breath through her teeth. "No, I don't want you tinkering with my underlying existence. I don't trust you, I don't think you have my interests at heart. You probably just wanna use me and have some sort of trickery spell active."

Seeing her bristle at the suggestion, Mercury just nodded. "Okay. I won't change anything about who and what you are." The Storm's Raiment drew a little bit tighter around him, as if embracing his fur. It looked so soft, and yet so dense. An unfeeling shroud that kept its wearer warm and safe.

What did she have, instead? A body full of maws, full of hunger. A desire to eat and eat and eat. Growling, she turned to her Skill and deactivated a chunk of them again. They pissed her off, too.

She pulled out a chunk of meat from her inventory and ate it in one bite, letting it settle in her stomach. The power of the acid in there had settled down, and it actually stayed full. She was weaker, though, especially to surprise attacks, but whatever.

If these two fucking clowns wanted to kill her, they were welcome to try, and she'd bite their heads off.

But nothing happened.

Both of the stupid loving couple just looked at her as she chewed, snarled, and looked out the window. They waited for her to calm down, to let her catch her bearings. It was aggravating, in its own way.

Any self-respecting demon would have already tried to exploit her moment of anger, and gotten their skull smashed in exchange. But nothing like that happened. There was no carnage to calm her, no blood she wanted to shed because someone deserved it. They didn't even offer a deal.

Mercury just said he'd not bother her about it. If she asked, he'd probably agree immediately. What a pain.

Bael stood up, almost knocking the chair over. The legs of the seat scraped across the floor, ringing out as the only noise in the small house. "I'll be watching you, mopaaw. You-"

He shook his head, interrupting her. "Mercury," he said. "My name is Mercury. Please use it."

The anger grew even more. "Why would you be so polite about it then? If you want me to use it, *make me*."

Again, the mopaaw just shook his head. "No," he said. As if her anger just slid off of him. Hadn't he attracted wrath? Wasn't he supposed to be an angry person? Did he fucking *pity* her?

Bael raged inside his own mind. Mercury spoke some more. "If you don't respect me enough to use my name, that's fine. It bothers me," he said, "but I won't stop you. I'll just interact with you less. You're allowed to be an asshole, after all."

He frowned at him. "And you'll let me disrespect you in your own house? Not gonna throw me out?"

Mercury gave him a long look, then a faint smile. "Do you need a place to stay the night? It's gonna rain soon, and we do have a guest room if you're tired."

"Are you making fun of me?" he asked, angrily.

“A tiny bit, maybe,” Mercury admitted sheepishly. “But at the same time, I mean it. It’s okay for you to stay. You’re angry. I can tell you don’t really hate me, y’know? It’s part of <Truth>. The Skill that lets you know when I’m honest.”

He growled. “I’m not homeless.”

“And yet, you’re miles away from your home,” Zyl noted. “If you need a place-”

Bael didn’t listen. He grabbed their table and tossed it against the wall, hoping to hear it splinter. Instead, he simply saw Zyl there, catching it. Lines of anger drew themselves onto his face, and he turned, walking outside. Neither moved to stop him.

He slammed the door shut behind himself. The sky was dim and overcast.

The demon lord walked through the streets, empty of people. A few minutes later, it did start raining.

What an atrocious day.

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“Should we... do something about that?” Marcel asked, looking out the window of the gloryhall.

Avery walked up to the side of his office, looking down at the guy stomping his way through the rain. His hair was long and charcoal black, sticking to his face and back. Dark eyes were looking... nowhere, really. He was just looking to walk.

Slowly, the guild master nodded with a sigh. “It’s kinda my job to take in people with emotional regulation problems, huh?”

Marcel snickered at him. “Yeah, because you’re so very normal.”

At that, a big grin sprouted on the guild master’s face. “Yeah, most normal guy around. Avery McAverage.” He took a deep breath, then opened the second floor window. Rain and wind whipped against his face. “Hey!” he called out to the dreary guy downstairs.

The stranger snapped to attention, looking up at him. Dang, those eyes held a fire. A small shiver went down Avery's spine. He grinned. "You looking to beat someone up?" he asked.

Bael stared at him in disbelief. Was everyone in this place a fucking maniac? And, despite that, seeing the big grin on the man's face, his sunglasses hiding his eyes, he found himself nodding. "Yeah," the demon said. "I want to break something."

Avery spread his hands wide in a welcoming gesture. "I'm a something!" he said, cheerfully, then swung off the side of the building, and landing easily on the street. He was strong, and the shock was no trouble at all. Instead, he simply moved to do some stretches, the rain soaking his garments.

Raising an eyebrow, the stranger scowled at him. "You sure about this?" he asked Avery.

"Definitely," the guild master replied. "I'm tough. And my buddy upstairs is a healer."

Marcel stood at the window, lighting himself a char. He flinched as he came up. Quickly taking the char out of his mouth, he called down. "Bring him inside if you fuck him up! I ain't getting drenched just cuz my boss is an idiot," he said.

"Kahahaha! Marcel, you're such an ass. Ah, well," Avery said, turning to the stranger again. Something was sincerely fucked about that guy, and if it was needed, then the guild master would just pummel it outta him. Fighting was honest, after all. "You heard him. If you snap all my bones, do me the courtesy of dumping me on a bed, yeah?"

The scowl on the stranger's face tightened. "You'd trust someone random to do that?"

Avery grinned, bright and wide. "Hells yeah I would. You strike me as the kind to be chill about it."

"What if you're wrong?"

"Then Marcel gets his parade rained on," he said with a grin.

"What if I kill you?" the stranger asked.

The air cooled down. Avery felt another shiver of excitement run up his spine. "My man," he said. "If you kill me, I'll crawl back outta my grave to shake your hand and congratulate ya."

“Cocky bastard,” the stranger sneered. Then, his skin cracked. Lava and charcoal was unveiled from beneath a human veneer. “Fine, then. I’ll tear you apart. Try to fight back. It’ll be cathartic.”

Avery took a deep breath. The rain clung to his dreadlocks, the air thick and heavy. His clothes were already starting to soak, but he still smiled a bright smile, baring his teeth. It was just a little monstrous, just a little bit.

Slowly, he rolled his shoulders, stretching his legs, focussing on his heart, making it pump faster. He warmed up in a moment, and then, his skin roiled. In one great motion, it rose into scales, and Avery grew a few inches taller.

His eyes started to burn with fire, even behind those sunglasses of his. He looked at the demon in front of him, the way the human skin started cracking apart. Flaking. That wasn’t a human, it was a monster. Just like him, right?

The guild master grinned even wider. A moment passed. His heart beat. Then he launched himself at the thing.

Underneath his feet, the pavement cracked. He moved so fast, his shoes just about exploded from the force. A moment later, his foot crashed into the arm of the demon, blocked. There was a horrible noise, like two trees slamming into each other, and Avery smiled.

“Huh,” the demon said. “You’re tough.”

“Why thanks,” the human replied. “You too.”

At that, Bael bared his teeth. He felt angry, and violent. A maw opened on his arm, latching shut around the leg- except there was nothing there anymore. Those teeth sprouted, only to clamp down on empty air. Avery danced back on the pavement, hopping on one leg.

“Ayaya,” he said. “Almost had me! So close!” Then he sneered. “Yet so far.”

Bael snarled with fury. He took a step forward, his rage flooding through his body. Wings sprouted from his back, and with a single beat, he vanished forward. The air cracked in his wake like a whip, and he slammed into the guildmaster, driving him down into the pavement.

The stone cracked and roiled, blood flowing from Avery’s mouth as his scales ground against the floor. With a motion, he threw his arms backwards, grabbing some purchase, then buckled his hips hard enough to send Bael flying just a bit.

A moment later, the human was back to his feet, grabbing the demon's throat and slamming him into the pavement, following it up with a brutal kick to the face. More human skin broke and split, revealing the demon hidden underneath. Maws stacked upon maws, multiple sets of furious eyes, dark purple skin with veins of magic.

"I'll tear you limb from limb," the demon snarled.

In reply, Avery simply stuck out his tongue. "Catch me if ya can!"

Then he vanished, leaving a tunnel in the rain where he ran. Growling, then roaring, the demon beat his wings, following the human, sending more droplets scattering. A moment later, he ran right into a brutal kick to his throat that cracked his spine, crushed his windpipe and sent him sputtering to the ground.

Bael grasped his neck for a moment, then recovered a half second later. Furiously, he snatched at where the guild master should have been, but *wasn't*. Again, he roared, charging through the rain.

When another kick threatened to take his head right off, he tackled the guild master, wrapping his arms around the human's stomach. Avery, however, was a lot better at grappling. Bael was a strong fighter, but not a very technical one. A simple beast with intuition to bite and claw, and not much more.

With swift movements, Avery spun in the air, instead sending the demon to the ground. He slithered out from the grasp, jamming his knee between the demon's chin and collarbone, barring Bael from opening his mouth. Then, a swift rain of punches onto the demon's head followed, each one cracking the pavement.

A moment later, Bael roared. With one swift, brutal motion, he grabbed Avery's arm, then pulled. The guild master's entire body was caught in the motion, suddenly slamming head-first into the ground. Then he was flung skywards, instantly flying dozens of meters. Blood flowed from his forehead, down onto his glasses, and he grinned brightly.

"Wake up, old man!" he yelled. "Or we'll wreck your house!"

Grumbling, and with creaking bones, Yasashiku Ryuutesai walked out into the cold night air. "Ah, this isn't good for me," he said with a shiver, then picked up a hammer. "Ya couldn't fight anywhere else?!" he demanded.

Avery raised an eyebrow as he fell. "What? Do you want me to wreck the ci-"

“Don’t ignore me!!” Bael roared, streaking through the sky like a meteor, slamming into Avery and knocking the air from his throat. Instantly, the demon landed another strike on the human’s head, cracking his sunglasses, and spun to place the guild master below him.

Then, Bael beat his wings, accelerating to the ground.

Yasashiku sighed, loudly. “Darn youngsters,” he said, twirling the hammer in his hand. Then he hit the ground, just once.

The stone rippled, then solidified, reinforced itself a hundred times over. A thin dusting of metal covered it, now, and when the guild master was driven down into it, the ground did not give.

Avery felt his bones crunch inside his body. His ribcage buckled for a moment, his spine creaked, and still, he drew in another breath of humid air. “That hurt, fucker,” he said through bloodstained teeth.

“It was supposed to turn you into paste,” the demon snarled. “Durable fucker.”

With a quick motion, Avery removed the last of his sunglasses, revealing his eyes. They were slitted, dark and brutal red. For just a moment, Bael flinched back. What the hell was wrong with the people here, he wondered?

Just long enough for Avery’s shin to find his skull. The demon was sent rocketing off to the side, slamming into a reinforced wall, ringing the metal like a soft gong. “Now, now, none of that,” Yasashiku said, tapping the ground again. Instantly, things grew quieter, the vibration distributed through the metal and absorbed by sheer volume.

Avery was on the demon again a moment later, sending his leg into Bael’s stomach - only to find an open maw of teeth, waiting.

The jaw clamped down on Avery’s foot, piercing and grinding through his scales, grinding against his bones. The guild master howled, punching at the demon, only to find its face had turned into one singular waiting maw as well.

He grunted in pain, then resolved himself. In one motion, he picked up his foot and his arm, still trapped in the mouths, and slammed the demon into the ground. Again, and again, and again, like he was wielding some sort of bio-bonded hammer.

It was a disgusting feeling, the way the sharp teeth ground up and down on his bones. His blood pooled into the demon's waiting mouth, and yet, he slammed it down over and over, watching the shell's bones snap and break and reform into more demonic ones.

Avery frowned, then stopped. Instead of smashing his problem, he took a deep breath.

Power surged through him, his muscles bulging. The rain hitting his skin turned to steam. He felt his blood run hot in his veins, and a smile spread on his lips again as the pain was devoured by the thrill of combat. "Okay, so you're an absorption type," Avery said. "Lemme show you a little something I've been working on."

The technique was incomplete. But what better way to grow than in the middle of battle? Logically, it should work.

Avery pulled more muscle from his strength. Then put it away again. Pulled, and put it away. His body started rapidly expanding and shrinking, faster and faster as he began to pulse. It grew more extreme, too, with his skin pulling tighter and tighter around his skeleton, until, one moment to another, he vanished.

Just a second later, Avery reappeared, stumbling, falling to the floor, a single step away. He laughed. "Kaha! Kahahaha!" Then he slammed his foot into the demon again. "See that?! Get fucked!"

Then, a fist slammed into his face. It split his lip open, spilling more blood on the ground, but he didn't even care. With monstrous ferocity, he hit right back, slamming his own fist into the demon's face, sending the fucker flying into the building again. "I vanished! And reappeared! What an experience! Have you ever had all your organs pulled through a straw then spit out the other side?!"

Bael snarled. "Can't say I have, human. Shut up and hit me."

Avery grinned. "Gladly," he said, and kicked again.

The move was parried, and met with another punch that he pushed aside in exchange. Suddenly, instead of a great war, the two found themselves in a grappling match. Blow for blow, they fought. Punches and kicks flying through the air, sending the rain scattering, breaking bones that righted themselves again.

Humanity crumbled aside. Monstrous drive laid in Avery's eyes as he went blow for blow with the demon lord, a task so unreasonable he never should have been able to do it. Yet, he loved every second of it. The thrill of the fight...

And the way that the anger boiled off of his opponent.

Then, Bael gripped him again, and tore off his arm.

It was a single swift motion. One moment Avery had his left arm, the next, it was gone, held in Bael's hand. The demon gave it a glance, considering whether to eat it or not. It was a gesture of respect. Of honour. He glanced at Avery-

And saw a leg flying towards his face.

With another crack, the blow landed clean. "Call that one <Legbreaker>," Avery grinned. It was a system-sanctioned move, and it had fully crumbled the human shell that was left. The reinforced wall of Yasashiku's metal was dented.

Blood poured out of his shoulder like a fountain, and the guild master didn't care. He grinned through red teeth and a bloodstained face. In the rubble, there was a demon.

Bael's shell had cracked. The lie of humanity was peeled aside, and what was revealed was a monstrous thing, of grafted limbs, of devoured leviathans. There was no truth to be found there, for any shape the Thing took would always be a lie.

And yet, he was Bael. Baelzebuth, ruler of all demons, once-avatar of gluttony, and a fighter.

He took a deep breath, and looked at the sky, then tossed the arm back at the guild master. The rain plastered his dark hair against his demonic face. "We're done," he said. "Thank you. You humans are monsters."

Avery smiled, then extended his remaining hand, pulling the demon up from the rubble. "All cooled down? Come on, let's find you a place out of the rain, and get my arm reattached."

Yasashiku yawned. "You kids done playing around?" the old man grumbled. "Cuz I'm going back to sleep."

The metal covering the street receded. The cobblestone returned to the way it usually stood. Baal grasped the extended hand, and pulled himself up. The pair of guild master and demon walked silently through the rain, heading to a place suitable for misfits like them. The godseeker's guild.

Marcel was gonna be so pissed when Avery asked him to reattach an arm.