

Chapter 254: Forgiveness

“Hey Marcel!” Avery said, giving a bright smile. He was holding his left arm in his right hand, using the torn-off appendage to wave at his friend.

The receptionist, for his part, looked at the guild master with a less than excited expression. “You’re splattering blood all over the floor.”

“Ah, dang,” Avery said, pausing. He quickly shifted his grip in the arm, so that the blood would stay inside the appendage, rather than flow out. “Can you, uh, stitch it back on? We’ll call Mercury to clean the blood off the floor, shouldn’t be too much trouble for him, right?”

Marcel stared at him. With a long, long sigh, he opened up the door to the guild master’s office. “Come in, then, you fucking morons,” he said, lighting himself another char. His eyes quickly found the rain-soaked demon that Avery had dragged in, like a wet dog being excited about a particularly fun stick. Or maybe bringing in a bear. “You’re our newest stray?” he asked.

The demon lord, Bael, who has subjugated all of Arterus with an iron fist, ruler of the 72 demon cities, braver of the ocean depths, liberated champion of gluttony... nodded in defeat. “Yeah,” he said quietly. “I guess I am.”

“You sound tired,” Marcel said, taking a deep pull from the char. “Need a bed?”

“... Yeah.”

Nodding quietly, the receptionist threw him a towel. “Get yourself dried off. You can crash on the couch while I stitch up Avery, then we’ll show you the guest rooms. Don’t wreck anything, and we’ll get along just fine,” he said. Then, he glanced at the guild master, who was still holding his disattached arm. “... Mostly fine,” Marcel corrected.

Following his directions, the demon did just that. Bael folded his wings behind his back, and sat down on the plush couch in the office. It looked... lived in. There were cups still on the small coffee table, having gone cold. There was an entire shelf of sweet bread, dotted in raisins, as well as a few monster parts placed around. One or two made his stomach rumble, but it would be rude to eat someone’s trophy, so Bael just laid down, draping a hand over his eyes.

Marcel, for his part, already had medical supplies on him. After all, he'd rather expected Avery to get hurt. Maybe not this hurt, though.

Sighing softly, he took the arm into his hands, disinfected it with a quick spell, then pressed it against the still open wound, making Avery wince. The guild master had really rather high vitality, so he could, of course, regrow a limb, but it would take time and energy. Reattaching it was just more efficient.

With deft, practiced motions, Marcel used another healing spell to hold some of the internal flesh in place. Then, he stitched the skin together, making sure the arm was properly attached. He picked up a level in <Treatment>, too, which was nice.

Still, it was a dirty, insufficient job. Not even high vitality could heal blood vessels that were out of alignment. So, this was where the delicate part came in. The stitches really were just a temporary attachment. Marcel sat down next to Avery, held his hands over the wound, and chanted.

White-yellow magic coursed across his hands, manifesting tiny spell-circles inside the flesh of Avery. A pale glow suffused the torn flesh. The circles were small, arranged above blood vessels and nerves, reconnecting them, making sure matching parts found each other. Sinew and ligament found one another, attaching and repairing the shoulder joint. Arteries reattached, letting blood flow through the arm.

When the nerves reattached, Avery yelped. Marcel quickly cast a numbing spell. It wouldn't be that... painful, per-se, but it would be a horribly awkward feeling to have one's nerves writhing around inside one's flesh. So, it was easier if the guild master just sat still.

Marcel wasn't even a proper healer, so he couldn't close the wound up fully, but he didn't really need to. Avery's vitality was so high, and he had regenerative Skills of his own. All Marcel needed to do was cast a couple heals, and let the guild master's body take care of the rest. That didn't mean he enjoyed the process.

Too many people around him had recently gotten hurt. His healing Skills decidedly weren't meant to level that fast. When Stormbraver had been rebuilt, the medic work was some of the most miserable he'd ever done. Even worse than being a receptionist. Stitching people up all day, and worst of all, levelling from it.

The truth was that Marcel wanted people to be healthy and happy. Truly, how sick and twisted of him. Wanting Avery to stop getting his arm torn off.

“Hey, Marcel, I think you’re squeezing me a little tightly,” Avery said with a half-smile, half-grimace.

Quickly, the receptionist sighed, and stopped channelling the spell. His employer’s flesh had already mostly mended. His skin still sported a bit of a scar, but knowing Avery, that, too, would fade. Marcel pulled the stitches back out.

“You brought him in,” the healer said, nodding towards the demon. “You show him the rooms.”

“Nooooo,” Avery protested weakly. “I am grievously hurt, Marcel. You must do this task for me. Please.”

Staring at the dramatician, Marcel smiled, closing his eyes in a kind, gentle way. “Oh, sure. Then you’ll get Mercury, right? Trek through the rain again and drag that mopaaw here to clean up your mess? You wouldn’t make me do that, too?”

Avery blinked. He took a long moment. Sighing, he went to his desk, grabbed a pair of replacement sunglasses, put them on his face, then nodded at Marcel. “I’ll show Bael around. I’ll leave the cleanup to you.”

Marcel sighed, taking another puff of his char. “Same as always, asshole.”

Mercury had been trying to sleep. He really had. It wasn’t something he *needed*, per se, but it was still something he enjoyed, sometimes. So, when the street around him was filled with the loud crashes of combat, he had been rather annoyed.

Now, of course, he couldn’t fall asleep anymore. One of his zeyjn was on the awake shift, the others practicing their weaving and magic in the dream realm. So, when someone knocked at his door in the middle of the night, Mercury heard it.

He sighed, endlessly softly, into the fabric of the Storm’s Raiment. The drifting clouds around his neck swallowed up the noise, reducing it to silence. Mercury cloaked himself in his <Veil>, slipping out from Zyl’s hug, and slinked down the staircase with <Soft Steps>.

[<Soft Steps> has levelled up! <Soft Steps 2 -> 3>]

The kitchen looked almost sinister in the darkness, vague shapes seeming to hide thin threats. Except, of course, Mercury could sense the shadows, and so, the darkness hid nothing from him. With <Greater Perception> he could also hear the faint breathing behind the door, and even take a pretty good guess of who it was.

With a single, swift application of <Force of the Hecatoncheires>, he manifested a ghostly hand of invisible power, and pulled open the planks of wood that separated the domicile from the outside. “Come in, Marcel,” he said.

Smiling faintly, the receptionist did just that, wringing some rain out of his hair. “I got soaked again,” he bemoaned, his usual bright blonde turned drab by the water.

Mercury snickered a little. “Yes, and now you’re spilling mud all over my kitchen,” the mopaaw bemoaned.

“As if it takes you more than a moment to clean,” Marcel said with a smile.

“Yeah, yeah,” Mercury sighed, calling on <Rainfall>. A brief gust of wind and cleaning rain fell around him, washing away the grime and mud, carrying it outside in one swift moment, leaving the floor clean. “So, what brings you here?”

Marcel smiled crookedly. “Well,” he said. “Avery got his arm cut off-”

“Huh?” Mercury asked, wide-eyed.

“-and spilled blood all over the gloryhall. He’s asked me to fetch you to clean it.”

Mercury blinked. Then, he stared at the receptionist for a long moment. “You have got to be kidding me.”

“Not so,” Marcel shook his head. “Will you help us solve this grave problem, put the people’s hearts at ease? It’d be really rather troublesome if there were too many questions in the morning.

For a long moment, Mercury just stared at the younger man. Then, he let out a long sigh.

“Sure,” he said, pulling open the door again. The pitter-patter of the rain on the cobblestones filled the air with noise. “But you gotta tell me how Avery lost his arm.”

Marcel smiled, stepped outside, and found that not a single raindrop reached his head, all of them being warding aside by the Storm's Raiment. "Well," he said, "I don't know too much. Just that he then proceeded to drag some sort of demon into the gloryhall, who seemed a little upset with life in general."

Walking casually forward, Mercury nodded along. "I see. Perhaps it would be best to keep me away from this demon," he noted.

"I'm not even gonna ask," Marcel said with a shake of his head.

Mercury laughed slightly. The two walked on, mostly in comfortable silence. The night was dark and full of clouds, but it was also, somehow, peaceful.

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Mercury cloaked himself in his <Veil> while cleaning, hoping to avoid being seen by Bael. He thought that, perhaps, right now, the demon wouldn't wanna see him. So, he did his job quickly, heading in and then out, back into the rain. The godseekers were largely decent people, so hopefully, Bael would get a bit of a calming experience, there.

For his own, he just stood amidst the rainfall for a little while. There was something so very peaceful about a quiet night, raindrops falling on cobbled streets, sliding down into the city's sewers. It smelled of fresh rainfall, with none of the thick stench of car exhausts that he was often used to back on Earth.

Mercury closed his eyes, walking through the city using only his dim awareness of shadows to guide him. His footsteps were quiet and easy, suffocated by the falling rain. It was serene. If a little lonely.

The wind brushed him by, for a moment, running through his fur and sending it whipping through the air.

It was rather cold, but Mercury didn't mind that at all. Instead, he just kept walking. Past the smithy of Yasashiku, past his own house, following the scent of the rain. Something tingled at the edge of his awareness, something magical.

What was it?

A thin string that beckoned him forward. A dim knowledge... ah. <Intuition>. Seems like it grew a little from his breaking the third veil. The Skill had been stuck at level six for a long

while, so he suspected it might evolve at level seven. Amusingly, his <Intuition> told him that that threshold was approaching rapidly.

How silly. A skill that gave him a premonition of its own evolution.

Silently, he followed that thin connection through the soaked streets, rain streaking off his cloak and hood, never sticking to his fur. He walked until he reached the city gates, then looked upwards. There, high above him, on the wall, sat a figure.

The shadows played quietly on the ground, cast by the faint light of the moon. Breeze sat high on the stone plinths, the boy, storm incarnate, dangling his legs over the edge, looking down at Mercury. He smiled, faintly. "Come up, come up, Biso!" he called.

Next to him was a young woman, wearing a dress of leaves. Her hair was snow-white and her eyes green like the grass. Alice, the inhuman heroine, waved at him. She didn't speak, instead just waiting for him to come up by himself.

Sighing faintly, the mopaaw resigned himself to his fate. The Storm's Raiment unfurled behind his back for the first time, forming ethereal wings of snowy clouds, fraying at the edges, a little like his own fur. It was strange. He could almost feel them as part of him, since the item was bonded to him, yet it was also so distinctly different from himself.

He smiled a little at the bizarre feeling, then let the wings that sprouted from his cloak beat once. The movement lifted him off the ground, throwing him upwards into the air, hurtling higher. He flapped them again, carrying himself above the stoney grey of the walls, casting his gaze over the landscape, shrouded in fog and enveloped by moonlight.

It was beautiful.

The rain slid off his wings with each drop, falling to the ground without ever touching him. Some of the droplets even fell right through the cloudy wings, as if they weren't even there at all. For a small moment, Mercury just hovered amidst the storm. Wind and rain and moonlight brushed against him, as if an invitation by the world to be free, to breathe.

He listened, and landed gently on the city walls, looking out over the vastness in front of him.

"It's pretty, isn't it?" Alice asked. Her voice was as soft as ever, and yet, the wind carried it across the air so clearly, as if bewitched by her tone.

"It's so empty," Breeze grumbled. Somehow, the child that was a storm given shape didn't like the vast openness, instead preferring to be around people. Despite everything, the boy liked the city. Even when he went to "rescue" people from there.

He was, after all, a child.

"Both can be true," Mercury said with a smile. After all, he loved adventuring. Setting out into the unknown by himself. But he also enjoyed cities, being around people. There was something nice about both.

Alice smiled. "See, I told you inviting him was a good idea."

"Of course it was," Breeze rolled his eyes. "Biso is fun. He gets it. Not like you. Loner."

The heroine laughed at that, a quiet, calm laughter that rang above the city.

Mercury looked at the silly pair. "Why'd you ask me to come?"

"We didn't, really," Alice said with a shrug. "We simply gathered, and you knew we wanted your company."

"You get me," Breeze said. "You understand in a way even Alice doesn't."

At that, the girl rolled her eyes. "Oh, shush. You still like me better," she said, smiling.

"True," Breeze replied calmly. "But that's different."

Mercury sat down on one of the rising battlements at the edge of the wall, looking out over the world. The rain turned the pale stone a dark hue, standing as a tall silhouette in the night. From up here, he could see so far. "Why were you sitting here?" he asked.

"Just hanging out," Breeze said, dangling his legs over the edge. "Just talking."

"Listening," Alice added. "We were listening to the world."

Tilting his head, Mercury tried to do the same. Listening to the world. Almost by itself, the curtains parted, the veils falling aside. The golden veil of reason, the iridescent veil of reality, and the white veil of separation. Each one fell to the wayside, although the last of them needed a push.

The world was revealed in all the wonderful wholeness that he knew. Each and every thing was interconnected, strings of familiarity blanketing everything in a gilded, magical gossamer web. It was beautiful. And he knew why he belonged.

Slowly, he looked at Breeze. "Tonight?" he asked, his voice shaking slightly.

Smiling sadly, the young boy looked at him. "Tonight," he nodded. "It's been building for a while, hasn't it? With you around, I can't help but see the <Truth>. The honest truth. That..." the kid choked on his words. His face was awash with rain, streaking down his cheeks. "That I'm dead. That I'm a killer. And that the Thing that killed me," he said, pointing towards the gloryhall, "is right there."

Mercury drew in a hissing breath. The spirit of the boy finally saw things as they were, then. That he was a shadow of a human who wanted to escape. A shadow of a corpse, risen again. A storm, pushing breath, pushing life into a dead body that just wanted to run. Run with the wind.

"You know it, then?" he asked.

"I know it," Breeze replied. "I knew it the moment that... Bael walked into Stormbraver. The moment he knocked on your door."

Slowly, Mercury nodded. He let the kid have his moment.

"How did you come to terms with being a murderer, Bisso?" Breeze asked, quietly.

Ah. That was a troublesome question. He took a deep breath, then gave a small sigh, and talked.

"I never did," Mercury said. "And I hope I never do. Being a murderer... well, it's accurate. I have killed, after all. But it's not part of my identity, not part of who I am. I have murdered people. I am not a murderer," he said.

Breeze took a long moment, then huffed slightly. "You've killed in self defence, right? Not like me," the boy shook his head. "Not like me. I killed because I thought I was doing the right thing. Thought I was saving people. And now they lay there," he said, looking into the distance. Somewhere out there, there was a stormswept hill, full of corpses. "Dead. A hill of corpses, of my making."

"I forgive you," Mercury said.

The boy turned to him, face twisted in anger and confusion. "Huh?" he said. "Huh?!" he demanded. "What gives you that right, Biso? What gives you—"

"Sit down," Mercury said. Breeze looked at his own feet, noting that he was standing on the side of the wall. His feet only a single step away from that abyss. He looked at Mercury, stiff and unmoving. "There is nothing that gives me the right," the mopaaw continued. "But it's true. I'm not angry at you for this. It's a tragedy what happened. But having to live with the guilt? Not having known what you did? That was a tragedy, too."

"Why did you never tell me?" the kid demanded.

Mercury looked at him for a long, long moment. Then, quietly, he asked. "Were you ready to hear it?"

Breeze looked at him, wet, greenish hair plastered across his childish face. Large eyes fixed on Mercury, liquid streaming down from them. Rain and tears in one messy mix. He stared at the mopaaw, then looked aside, unable to meet his gaze. "No," he said. "I wasn't. I'm not."

Gently, Alice laid a hand on the boy's shoulder. It was a warm, gentle touch. He flinched for a moment, but didn't pull away. "Breeze. Sit with me, she asked."

Slowly, the boy looked at her. Then he sat down, legs dangled down from the crenellation - on the inside of the wall this time. For a long moment, they were quiet. For another long moment, he leaned against Alice. And then, for some time, she pulled him into a hug and stroked his hair.

"It's alright," she said. "It's alright. Take as long as you need."

The night was beautiful and full of tears.

Mercury looked at Breeze, sobbing in Alice's arms. She whispered to him occasionally, letting him cry. Looking at the two of them, Mercury found it sad. He wished there were some words he could say to the kid to make everything okay again, but there weren't.

People had died.

Kids had died at his hands.

There was no constellation of sounds that could make that hurt disappear. Mercury sat with the two of them for a long, long while.

"I didn't know," Breeze sobbed. "I didn't know."

Alice patted his head again, looking at him with sad eyes. "You didn't. It happens."

Breeze sobbed even more. "This doesn't happen to people," he said. "It happens to monsters."

"You aren't a monster," Mercury said. "Kids can never be monsters."

"Then why do I feel like one?!"

"Because you aren't," the mopaaw said. He looked for another long moment, the kid wracked with sobs. "Feeling guilt proves that you aren't a monster. If at some point you kill someone and feel nothing... that's when you need to worry," Mercury replied.

Funny, then, that he felt no guilt over killing wrath.

He sure had gotten good at declaring himself judge, jury and executioner.

Mercury sighed softly, leaving his own lamentations to the side. There was a kid, sobbing, looking at him. "I'm... not?" Breeze asked.

Very gently, Mercury smiled. He reached out with a ghostly hand, ruffling Breeze's hair. "No, you're not." It was the <Truth>. Breeze was a lot of things. He was a storm, a corpse, a killer. Mercury could change some of those, but not others.

But he had never been a monster. He wasn't one now. The guilt was what absolved him.

"The only person who needs to forgive you is... you. Well, you could see forgiveness from the relatives of anyone you harmed, I suppose."

"I don't remember their faces," Breeze choked out.

"Then only yourself," Mercury said again.

The kid sobbed for a long while more. He did not forgive himself that night. And that was fine, too. Mercury looked up at the stars and the clouds. He thought, for a long while, about his own murders. And his guilt was carried away on a <Babbling Brook>.

He found that forgiving himself came really rather easily.