

Chapter 282: Fire and Thalassophobia

The master of the peak of Slaughter was a strong man. He was a wild man, built for brutality. With every swing of his fists, the air shattered, and he had broken armies before. For that was the essence of his art - brutality.

Zyl stood across from him with a calm, self-assured grace. He hadn't been broken before, and he wouldn't be broken now. Or so he thought.

When the first blow rattled onto his stomach, Zyl gasped. It knocked the breath right out of him, even as his body remained rooted in place. Like violence itself drawing him into a bear-hug and refusing to let him go. Another blow landed on his face.

Fist met cartilage, and Zyl's nose broke. Blood sprayed on the floorboards, even as they creaked. Just the punches themselves were beginning to throw up splinters of wood, the air whistling about angrily, making the peak master's hair flutter in the wind.

"What's wrong?!" the beastly man asked, throwing another punch, landing on Zyl's chin. "Where'd all that bravado go?!"

Gritting his teeth, the dragon smiled. It was a blood smile, his lip already busted, but he grinned still. With a swift motion, he brushed a punch aside, and staggered a few steps back. "Damn," he said. "You got me, that hurt. You pack a punch." He turned his head and spat blood on the floor.

The deacon of admissions grimaced at the bloodstains. "C'mon, fuck, man. I gotta clean that up, can you like... fight outside?"

For a single moment, the master of Slaughter looked over, and, wisely, the deacon shut his mouth. Mercury clapped the cowardly man on the shoulder, smiling faintly. "Don't worry," he said. "I'll clean up any blood splatters." Not that he thought there'd be any of this place left standing.

A blink passed, and Zyl spread his wings. Scales rolled over his skin, and he breathed out. The air shivered, wavering with heat-distortions. And Zyl punched back.

With a rush of wind, and the creaking of floorboard, the dragon flapped his wings just once, and was upon the peak master. Violence erupted instantly, the two tearing into each other with rabid abandon.

Zyl's first punch knocked one of the peak master's teeth out. In return, he got a black eye from a punch. By the third blow, the air was heating up. By the fourth, the wood around them was beginning to smoke and smoulder.

In less than a second, the floor around them was reduced to a pile of rubble, even their counter-force abilities no longer containing them. Wooden splinters flew through the air, and the two wrestled on stone.

With a swift motion, Zyl's claws dug a deep furrow into the peak master's body, adding more scars to the man's skin. In exchange, the monster in human skin just grinned, clapping his hands shut around Zyl's ears, shattering the dragon's eardrums.

When he staggered, the peak master landed another blow in his gut, making Zyl fold. But once the old monster prepared for a hammer-blow, Zyl kicked. His clawed feet dug a deep rent into the cultivator's belly, flaying skin from skin. The peak master spat blood, but it did not stop his smile.

Mercury turned to the receptionist, who was still staring at the rubble of his desk, where he'd been smacked through it. The middle-aged deacon sighed and rubbed his neck. "So," Mercury asked, "what's the peak Master's name?"

"Gun-Byeong the Beast," the deacon helpfully provided. Then, he sighed. "Also, I think we should get out of here, before we turn into casualties."

With a soft chuckle, Mercury shook his head. "I'll be okay," he said confidently. He might not be okay. "If it's gonna get rough for you, you should dip, though."

"Ah, dang. Guess I'll feckin' stick it out," the receptionist said and shrugged, picking his chair up from the rubble and taking a seat.

By now, Zyl was elbow deep into clawing at Gun-Byeong's flesh. Bones were shattered between the two, and one of the dragon's wings had been ripped off. Blood stained the wood, and the Beast laughed, even as he staggered back.

"Fakaka! Yes, beautiful! The body of a beast! You just don't break, do you?!" he asked, his flesh wriggling and mending.

Crimson fire flowed over Zyl's scales like water. His wounds burnt to ash, and healthy flesh filled the gaps. It looked... painfully hot, but the dragon didn't even flinch. Instead, he just stepped forward. The grin on Gun-Byeong's face threatened to split the peak master's face.

It was scary just how elated he looked when they clashed again. Both stepped forward, fist meeting fist. Their knuckles shattered, the floor exploded, the wood splintered, and the entire shitty admissions shack was blown away.

Walls folded outwards, and the ceiling shot into the sky. Wood splinters rained like snow, and with a beat of his single remaining wing, Zyl spiraled upwards into the air. Of course, the master of Slaughter wouldn't let that stop him. With another raucous laugh, he launched off the floor, shattering stones and shooting pebbles at Mercury's face, and ascended high up.

"Why *'the beast'?*" Mercury asked calmly. He had to raise his voice a little - the punches all exceeded the speed of sound and filled the air with loud cracks.

The deacon shrugged helplessly, gesturing at the peak master. "I mean... look at him," the man said. "That's a monster wearing human skin."

Mercury snickered softly at that description since he wasn't exactly human either. But that was fine. He had plenty of personhood in him. Gun-Byeong, meanwhile, seemed rather elated up there. With a bright grin, he ran into another haymaker. Qi-infused steps carried him across the sky, where Zyl's fist met his face, sending him flying.

With a momentous crash, the burly man cratered into the mountain, stone shattering underneath his bulk. His skin split open, and blood flowed over him, but he didn't relent. He just laughed, climbed out of the crater, and whispered to himself.

"More," he said. Mercury heard because of his Skills, but he didn't have to wait long until the man laughed, and shouted it to the sky. "Fakakaka! More!! **More!**"

Instantly, he flew into the sky again, the air cracking at his approach. Zyl breathed out a heat haze, smiling softly. He was a bit of a weirdo, too, after all. The two exchanged more brutal blows - bones snapping, then coming right back together as if magnetic. Fire covered Zyl's body like a host of crawling insects, his wounds disappearing in the wake of the flames.

"Weak," the dragon said with a smug smile. "You're weak."

At that, Gun-Byeong smiled. It was an expression full of happiness, genuine elation at the fact that he was simply allowed to use force. He smiled brightly, and flexed his muscles. Qi roiled from his core, and the deacon's eyes widened.

"He's using origin qi," elder Guleum whispered with awe. "He's burning his cultivation base."

"No," grand elder Yozai shook his head. "He is not burning it - master Gun-Byeong's cultivation is the Origin Reversal arts. He cultivates origin qi by being true to his base instincts. It is why he fights like that. The less he plans..."

"The more he grows," Mercury finished. "He's using Zyl as a whetstone."

The grand elder nodded solemnly. "Yes," he said. "Esteemed... aspirant, I suppose, you may have to mourn your boyfriend if you cannot stop the peak master."

Within the grand elder's gaze there was a twinkling there. A test. The sly old fox was probing Mercury for the truth, the depth of his strength. But in response, the mopaaw just smiled, crossing his hands behind his back. "Just watch," he said simply.

Gun-Byeong tore through the sky as nothing but a blur. The clouds scattered around him, blown away like pieces of tissue-paper. He grins, and slams into Zyl with a tackle that almost caves in the dragon's ribcage.

Origin qi burns from inside his dantian, thunder lacing his steps. With a single blow, the sky turns bright white, searing into Mercury's eyes and making him go blind for about half a second. Not that he needed eyes to see, but still.

Zyl's skin was scorched from the lightning bolt. Gun-Byeong stood, panting, his fists clenched, roaring for more, when the dragon's blackened hand closed around his face. Fire washed forward in an unimpeded tide, wrapping around the Beast's face. In response to his skin blistering, Gun-Byeong just gave a muffled laugh.

His hands came forward, grabbing onto Zyl's arm and twisting. In an instant, Zyl's ligaments tore, and his elbow hung uselessly in the air. Gun-Byeong instantly stepped forward, ignoring the horrific burns, and grabbed the dragon's face.

Without hesitation, Zyl bit him, sharp teeth digging into flesh, but the peak master didn't stop. Like a berserker, he jumped, pushing off his own Qi, and accelerating them both towards the mountain.

"Uh-oh," the clerk said.

Mercury stood there, waiting. <Magic> activated softly, just a gentle hum to firm up the ground a little.

A very good choice, since the rest of the peak promptly evaporated.

With another horrid crash, stone turned to slag. The peak master slammed Zyl into and right *through* the mountain, the two of them turning into a violent blur. Stone shards flew towards Mercury, then halted mid-air as his mana moved.

Twisting one of his zeyjn into the right shape, he beckoned the stone to settle. The shards simply and calmly reintegrated with the stones below, and the terrified deacon pulled his head out of its hiding place behind a plank of scattered wood.

Zyl hung limply in the Beast's arms, and Gun-Byeong, the master of the peak of Slaughter, had the gall to look sad. Rocks stuck in his flesh, dribbling tiny lines of blood down his skin, and yet, he shook Zyl.

"Hey, come on. Surely that's not all you got," he said quietly.

For a moment, the peak was silent, and yet, Mercury smiled. Very slowly, Zyl's limp form cracked. His limbs snapped back into place, one by one, and Mercury watched as his fingers regenerated, then wrapped around Gun-Byeong's arm. This time, heat rolled along them.

This time, there was the sound of burning flesh.

Gun-Byeong's arm burnt. Zyl's fingers sank deeper, and pain washed across the peak master's face. The dragon grabbed right to the other man's bones. Zyl locked his claws around the bones of the man's forearm, and then pulled.

Resisting would have only hurt more, so the peak master was forced to go with the motion. Fire and heat spread, and Mercury watched as Zyl tossed him. Again, there was a brutal crack, and more of the mountain evaporated. Aspirants of the peak of Slaughter fled downwards, rocks crumbling in tiny avalanches.

Sighing softly, Mercury drew on more mana, refilling his pool with <Grain of Infinity>, and stopped the landslides, saving the kids. They were all kids to him, even those in their earlier twenties. Gosh, he was over forty now...

Instead of contemplating that, Mercury watched the fight. The peak master dug himself out of the rubble, his veins bulging and visible against his bronze skin. He grinned, still, even as

blood flowed down his face and stained his hair. "More!" he demanded, leaping right back into the sky. "Show me **more!!**"

Zyl met him fist-on-fist. The shockwaves were enough to almost blow away the deacon, if Mercury didn't politely hold the man steady. In the blink of an eye, Zyl and Gun-Byeong collided a thousand times, fists and feet snapping out in lightning fast motions.

They brutalized each other.

With resounding cracks, bones broke. Fire and blood flowed in one, and Mercury had trouble telling the difference. Qi poured out in such masses that it stained the air yellow with bestial lightning, that it was hard to tell where the peak master ended and where his techniques begun.

He summoned phantom images of beasts, lightning-maws, claws and fangs forged from his origin qi, reinforced by decades of cultivation and slaughter. He'd bathed in the lifeblood of hundreds to make this, it was his true passion, his burning desire to become a real monster, to kill whoever he wanted whenever he wanted.

And Mercury smiled, because the peak master didn't know that to be a beast meant to be mindless.

Even now, he wasn't losing himself. He had a sharp focus on what he wanted. On what was important - even if that was violence. What a silly contradiction. All he could do was imitate beasts. He couldn't turn his head off and just slaughter, he had to *want* to slaughter. For any beast, that is never the desired outcome, it is but a matter of course.

Bael had once been a beast. They'd lost themselves to gluttony, a ravenous instinct driving them forward without consideration for health or safety. But the peak master didn't kill aspirants in his hunger. Even if he wiped out mortals, which he probably did, he couldn't do so mindlessly.

And that was why Zyl broke him. Because the peak master's desire, while strong, was contradictory. And Zyl's desire was so very simple.

To keep Mercury from being hurt.

For that singular purpose, even as Zyl broke, he focused. Even as the peak master lost himself to the violence, Zyl stayed calm and composed. It was a cold, ruthless efficiency with which he went about the butchery. Bones shattered and healed, only to be broken once

more. Blood spilled like a waterfall, dyeing the ruined slopes of the mountain red. The elders watched in awe as Zyl kept up with a peak master, as he kept simply moving and burning.

Grand elder Yozai gave Mercury another short glance, decidedly more respectful again. Yet another sneaky test he'd passed... it felt a little gross, but such was the martial world, he supposed. Full of idiots who only listened to strength and violence.

How pathetic.

Zyl won.

It wasn't an easy fight, but he didn't don his crown, either. Peak Master Gun-Byeong most likely didn't exactly go all-out either, but he still lost. It was done when Zyl ripped off his arm, and used it as a club to smack the peak master's face.

The first hit broke his nose, the second one knocked loose a few teeth, and the third sent the man into brief unconsciousness, which Zyl made good use of.

Suffice to say, by the time the peak master woke back up, he was little more than a misshapen sack of meat. Mercury looked at him with a small frown. "Zyl, I really appreciate the effort, but next time, please leave me more parts to put him back together."

Giving a sheepish smile, Zyl rubbed the back of his head with one hand, then handed over the torn-off arm with the other. "Here's... one more piece?" he offered tentatively.

"Urrrrghhh," Gun-Byeong groaned. His skin was already coming back together, his bones springing back into place. It was like watching a video playing in reverse. Mercury tilted his head faintly, and then shrugged.

"You know what?" he said, pressing the missing arm back against the shoulder joint, and watching ligaments move through the air like snakes. "I think you left me plenty of pieces." Then, a faint smile crossed his lips, and he turned to the elders. "This might look strange," he announced to them, "but don't worry. I'm a doctor, you see?"

Before anyone had a chance to reply, Mercury turned back to his *patient* and smiled faintly. He whispered a quiet word, the Skill that had absorbed his trusty <Medicine>.

"<Unravel>."

And Gun-Byeong came apart.

In front of Mercury, man was made into memory. A book to peruse, pages upon pages of bloodshed and slaughter, and yet ruined. Torn and broken. Threads out of place, like wayward wiring, sparking with electricity.

He breathed, and brushed his will against those wounds, and then mended them. They were already doing so on their own; Mercury just had to nudge them along ever-so-gently. Tiny touches that made reconnecting swifter, easier, that returned the peak master to not just whole but to being *healthy*.

And, while he was at it, well, he had no choice but to see what this origin qi cultivation method was about. “Hmmm.” Mercury hummed to himself. “Uh-huh.”

Then, he nodded, and the peak master came back together. The elders stared with horror on their faces. “What in the nine heavens was that?” elder Guleum breathed.

Grand elder Yozai didn’t even find words to speak. Seeing what Mercury did to people was strange. They didn’t *truly* turn into threads, after all. They still existed, and yet, most people could only halfway pick up on what he was doing.

In a way, that was pretty eldritch, right? His techniques were like an abyss for people to stare into, and he was changing the very fundamental realities of people as though he was some outer god.

Ew, what a gross thought.

Not the being eldritch part. Mercury was okay with that. But being a god felt icky. Wrong. He was just a guy. Being a person came first, and being a god made that almost impossible.

It just wasn’t for him, he mused. His thoughts were drawn back to reality when peak master Gun-Byeong the beast stirred, rubbing the back of his head. “Uuuurgh,” the old monster said, and Mercury smiled. And waited.

A second later, the bestial man stopped rubbing the back of his head. “Huh?” he asked. “I’m... fine? The hell? How long was I out? Must’ve been days to heal this good.”

Mercury looked at the deacon, and smiled. The officer of admissions on the peak of Slaughter swallowed once, then nodded. “Uhm, about... about a minute, peak master,” he said deferentially.

Gun-Byeong froze and stared. “No way,” he said. “I didn’t get enough levels for that.”

"I healed you," Mercury provided helpfully. The way he said the word *healed* apparently wasn't quite as wholesome as he thought, since both elders and the deacon flinched, and Chung Nam-Cheong took the quiet moment to turn aside and throw up.

Ignoring them, Mercury just held eye contact with the peak master of Slaughter. Gun-Byeong sat upright on the floor, leaning on arms that were as thick as tree trunks, staring up at Mercury. For the first time since showing up, his expression was a bit... pensive. Not drawn from agony, not a brimming violent smile, but careful.

One did not survive the martial world carelessly, after all. With a soft hum, the peak master crossed his arms, still staring at Mercury. The mopaaw didn't blink, but he did pull a bit of his <Lie> aside.

For just a moment, the humanity in his form faded. The pristine skin was replaced with fur and ice and wood. The true depth of his eyes laid bare, like the depths of an ocean. Looking at him made even Gun-Byeong shiver.

There was fear there, even just faint. "You're no beast," the peak master muttered quietly.

Mercury smiled brightly at that, then stuck out a hand. "You're right!" he said, putting the <Lie> and his <Veil> back in place. "I'm not a beast. I'm a perfectly reasonable person."

With a grunt, Gun-Byeong took his hand, and let himself be pulled up. "Fine," the middle-aged man said. "You gave me a good fight, redhead. And you, doc. Guess you're the peak of Slaughter's first physician." With a dismissive wave, he turned away. "Call yourself whatever you want."

"Teach me your origin qi arts," Mercury asked with a smile.

Gun-Byeong blinked. Grand elder Yozai gasped in shock. Elder Guleum held her breath, and Chung almost passed out on the spot.

"If you wish to be my disciple," the peak master said with a twitch of his eye, "you better kowtow to me nine times."

Mercury laughed. "I'd rather put a bullet in my skull," he said.

"The fuck's a bullet?" Gun-Byeong asked.

There was some humor in that, Mercury found.

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In the end, as a disciple of Slaughter, Mercury had a few privileges. There were contribution points - and he earned quite a few just by putting a good bit of the mountain back together. Usually, the cult's earth-affinity cultivators would need to be brought in for it, but with his new <Magic>, he simply asked the rock to move, and it did.

He also got a small hut, which was promptly turned into a mini hospital halfway up to the peak. And the amount of kids he had coming in within the first few hours was... he'd love to say surprising, but that was a lie. But there were many.

"Malnutrition," he diagnosed coolly. "Eat something with more protein. Tofu or seitan if you don't like meat. Next." A new scrawny girl. Mercury frowned. He would have asked her to open her mouth to see her teeth, but he didn't need that. He could already see through her. "Scurvy," he said calmly. "Eat an orange or three. Next."

A boy with broken legs. A girl with three stab wounds. A boy missing two fingers, which came in with a girl whose eye had a shiv in it. Mercury dulled their pain, healed them, then sent them on their way again.

In a single day, fifty youths came in, half of them with broken limbs or worse. It was a terrible thing, and he made the elders sit through it all with him. "Is this what you expect of your aspirants?" he asked quietly.

"Those who do not make it are unworthy," grand elder Yozai provided with all the security of a tissue caught in a storm.

"Those who make it got lucky," Mercury said with a frown. "Yes, they will be more vicious and cruel. Because they'll be traumatized. It is the duty of us elders to give the kids a better life."

"Suffering builds character," elder Guleum suggested.

With a scoff, Mercury shook his head. "This will only make me angry. No, suffering doesn't build anything. It breaks. Is that what you want your cult to be? A place where broken people go to get broken all over again? Where the lost go and throw themselves at a wall in hopes of maybe getting revenge? Pathetic."

Saying so, he stood, then frowned and waved his hand. "Both of you, go."

It would have been ridiculous to any onlooker. A newly entered disciple, wearing robes of grey stormclouds, brushing off elders and grand elders... and yet, that was what happened. Yozai and Guleum didn't even protest. They just... left.

"What peak are you part of, Chung?" he asked the boy.

Chung Nam-Cheong, who had met Mercury in his guard duty, frowned slightly. "The peak of Broken Balance, why?"

"Is it better than this?"

"Yes," the boy provided. "I think it is."

"Show me," Mercury asked.

Chung Nam-Cheong looked at the bloodstained beds, at the kids who sat there crying over their reattached fingers, and swallowed drily. "Yes," he said. "I will."