

## Chapter 283: Valley of Balance

The peak of Broken Balance was, in fact, two peaks. With a big, jagged cliff between them. The mountains were not nearly as jagged or spiky as the peak of Slaughter, but they were still pretty rough.

“On that note,” Mercury hummed. “Why are you here?” he asked.

Gun-Byeong the Beast, master of the peak of Slaughter, scratched at his beard. “Well,” he said. “You seemed interesting. And you are a disciple of my peak.”

“Barely,” Mercury sighed.

The burly man shrugged. “Barely still counts,” he tried, weakly.

Zyl gave Gun-Byeong a side-eye, and then shrugged. “Fair enough,” the dragon said. By now, both of them were pretty much fine again. At a certain level, regeneration became doable, so fights were... almost safe, really.

Of course, permanent injuries were a thing. Someone like Mercury had *plenty* of ways to inflict wounds that were almost impossible to heal. Same went for Zyl, and an old monster like Gun-Byeong had those, too. But anyone with a remotely functional mind wouldn't use those, because it would make the opponent use theirs.

So, in a spar, they just swung their fists, no holds barred... and no permanent injuries. No ‘attacking the very idea’ of someone. What a silly thing, Mercury thought. What was fighting like that for? Was it... fun? It didn't seem very fun.

At least, even when it didn't exactly hurt, Mercury didn't like getting his leg torn off.

Then again, he did let his friends set him on fire recreationally, so what did he know?

Instead of worrying about the purpose of fighting recreationally, something he was unlikely to understand anytime soon, Mercury looked at the peak of Broken Balance again. And the palace that spanned its top.

“So the ravine is the valley of Balance?” Mercury asked, looking down, and Chung nodded.

"It is," the boy said. Then, he looked at the palace. A gigantic construction made from white marble and black basalt, spanning both peaks. Between the two was a shattered bridge, where the colours may once have met.

Mercury tilted his head. "So where's the peak master?" he asked.

"Oh, one second," Gun-Byeong said with a little too much excitement. A moment later, he flared his Qi in a giant pulse, sending dust flying and the air rippling outwards. The stone of the palace shook just slightly, and not long after, two women rose from the respective peaks.

One was dressed in all black, with matching lipstick, fishnets, and a crop top, while the other wore an angelic, white robe, and even had a halo floating above her head. For a moment, the two looked like a united pair. Then, a moment later, whitey stuck her finger out at blacky. "Oh, how fucking dare you, you bitch!" she accused.

"Me?!" blacky responded, hand to heart, outraged. "How dare *you*?! It's not even midday yet, it is still my time!"

"Your time, yeah! That doesn't mean you get to blow up dust in my house, you bitch!"

"Oh, you, you, you, it's always just *you*, isn't it, Shiro? In your ideal world I'd just be quiet and stop existing until you looked my dang way!"

The angelic looking woman gasped in horror, then grimaced. "You know that's not true!" she said, pointing at the other lady, her cheeks flushing with outrage. "All I ask for, Kuro, is a little bit of consideration! It can't be that dang hard, can it? This is why we moved apart!"

Mercury blinked, and looked at Gun-Byeong. The master of Slaughter stood there with his arms crossed and a smug expression on his face. The mopaaw stared at the two women, and sighed softly. "Are they divorced?"

"Yep."

"Was this the peak of Balance before?" Mercury asked.

Chung shook his head. "It used to be the peak of *Fragile* Balance," the young cultist provided.

"And whose fault is that?!" the woman in black, Kuro, accused.

"I cannot believe this," Mercury said with a sigh, rubbing his eyes. "I just cannot believe it."

Shiro scoffed, crossing her arms. "Yeah? And which one of us is making even foreigners sigh, huh? Fuckin' bitch."

"Yeah, wow, this is painful," Zyl sighed. He looked at the sky and raised his voice to properly grab their attention. "Hey!" the dragon called. "Can the two of you just make up?"

"You want us to make out?! That's sexist!" Kuro accused.

"Pervert!" Shiro chided.

"This is my boyfriend," Zyl said, quickly picking up Mercury and placing him in front of himself like a shield.

The mopaaw turned human raised a hand. "Hi," Mercury said. "I'm gay. Also he said make *up* not make *out*."

And for the first time, the two stopped bickering, and looked at each other instead.

"Oh," Shiro said, then turned at Kuro with a mocking sneer. "You hear what you wanna hear, huh?"

The woman in black blushed, then crossed her arms. "So what if I do, huh?!"

"Wait you do?"

"Yeah, I do."

"Well, dang. Me too."

And then they kissed. Gun-Byeong stared in disbelief, his mouth wide open. "There's no way," he said. "There's no dang way."

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It took a little while for Mercury to actually make his way into the peak of, and he could absolutely not believe it, *Restored* Balance. That was after he had fixed the bridge between the two castles, and the two women who were very much so a couple again, it seemed.

"If you mention the words 'dual cultivation' one more time, I will personally unmake that bridge," Gun-Byeong said seriously.

Shiro pouted at his words. "Buzzkill," she said quietly.

The six of them - Mercury, Zyl, Chung Nam-Cheong, Gun-Byeong, Shiro and Kuro - sat in a room that was incredibly decorated. The furniture was plush, the entire thing was covered in a fluffy rug, and plushies covered shelves all over. The two women sat on a couch, and Gun-Byeong looked *entirely* out of place on his chair.

It was a plush chair, of course, and it also looked fit for a stuffed rabbit, rather than a man about as big as a freight train. And despite that, even after his gruff words, he politely took a sip out of a pink teacup.

Mercury really had not expected to find a pastel goth on Chronagen, yet here he was. "So," he said, "you two are the peak master of the peak of Restored Balance?"

"Yepyp," Shiro said cheerily, only having eyes for Kuro. "That's us."

"And you teach your disciples some kind of ice-fire balance method?" Mercury asked.

"For sure," Kuro said, staring at Shiro.

Mercury frowned slightly. "Alright," he said. "I'd like to learn?"

At that, both of the women turned to him.

"You're not ready," Kuro said.

"Not even remotely," Shiro said.

At that, Mercury tilted his head. "Why not?" he asked.

Softly, Shiro smiled. She even reached out to ruffle his hair, but Mercury pulled back. "You're too soft," she said.

"Too fluffy," Kuro added.

"Too well-kempt."

"Fire and ice are messy, y'know?" the woman in black asked, tilting her head and pouting, her raven hair covering her face. "And, at the end, you're not a disciple of our peak. Why should we teach you anything?"

Mercury blinked. Then, with a soft sigh, he turned to Chung Nam-Cheong, the youngest and, apparently, most sane person in the room. "Please just tell me how to make them teach me."

Shrinking slightly under everyone's gaze, the young man kind of just shrugged. "Well," he said. "The peak masters usually only teach disciples of their peaks when they have provided suitable contributions to the cult. That way we earn merits and can buy techniques. To get taught by the masters is expensive."

"Some make exceptions for monsters or prodigies," Gun-Byeong said, pointing at himself. "Like me. But a hidden expert? Most likely you're here to steal from us, learn everything here, and never give anything back."

"I've repaired two of your peaks?" Mercury said hopefully.

Gun-Byeong's smug expression faded into a faintly surprised one as he locked eyes with Kuro and Shiro. "Well, dang," he said. "You... have a point."

"With that, we can grant you access to our library," Shiro said.

"But no more. It is far from enough from personal tutoring," Kuro added. Both turned their faces away haughtily.

Mercury sighed, then nodded. "What does it take to become a disciple of your peak?" he asked.

"You must awaken your fire and ice meridians."

"Meditate at the peak of a volcano for a month. And at the depths of an icy cave for another."

Mercury held up his hands, triggered <Magic>, and summoned a fireball in one and an icicle in the other. "Is this enough to qualify?"

Both women stared. Then, very slowly, they nodded.

"Awesome," Mercury said. "Now, how do I earn merits?"

"Butcher those righteous dogs-"

Raising a hand to stop them, he added another stipulation. "*Without* murdering anyone."

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"Really?" Mercury asked, looking at the pile of rubble in front of him.

"Really," Kuro confirmed, hands on her waist.

Sighing softly, the mopaaw walked forwards. "And this is valuable?"

"Few disciples of the cult wish to master construction techniques. It's all poisons this, parasites that, no respect for a bit of building," Gun-Byeong said, waving his hand. "The youth of today has no respect for labour."

Shiro gave him a cold glare. "You're one to talk, bastard. The only thing you've ever done with a piece of lumber is smash it in half. How many bricks would it take to crack your skull?"

At that, the beastly man just grinned smugly. "All of them," he replied confidently, while Mercury walked up to the piece of rubble.

The demonic cult, apparently, paid out contribution for people who built housing. They needed a lot of it because of their penchant for taking in orphans or disabled people, discarded by the rest of the martial world. This was the last refuge of the desolate - and the Valley of Balance held a special importance even in this place.

It's where the cultists who swore off killing went.

Retired elders who could not go on outside missions, because the righteous sects would hunt them down. Kids too young or too afraid to be sent on butchery. Pregnant people. All of those were likely to stay in the Valley of Balance.

Mercury laid his hand on the pile of rubble, and hummed. <Magic> hummed to life in combination with <Woodworking> and <Magical Metallurgy>, and the debris stirred. Lumber rose, stone shifted into a foundation, pillars embedded themselves, made to float by their own will and a myriad of ghostly hands. Mercury split his manifold mind, and slowly set things into place.

Eyes snapped to the self-assembling house. "Dang," Shiro said. "That's nice."

"What's so impressive?" Mercury asked, but the peak masters were already bickering again. In fact, within seconds, it looked like they were just about to come to blows. It was, frankly, stunning that they hadn't tried to kill each other yet. So, in lieu of the very-powerful very-unwise people, Mercury turned his head to Chung, the young disciple of the cult.

"Ah, right. Constructing buildings usually takes many cultivators. Earth, wood, and metal affinities, to say the least of it. That's not to mention more exotic materials like paper or glass. And while metal may be optional for construction, it is necessary for tools used by

people who live in them,” the young man explained. “That makes any kind of housing a job suitable for multiple people.”

Mh. So him doing it by himself, with very little trouble, was probably odd. Still, it... really wasn't too much trouble for him.

[<Novice Woodworking> has levelled up! <Novice Woodworking lv. 2 -> 4>]

Usually, he would have preferred to level up the Skill the traditional way. Using simple tools, learning to shape his *rijn* into saws and planes, working boards and construction lumber, using chisels and doing it honestly. This was... well, cheating.

He asked two pieces of wood to combine, and they would. New grain would grow from dead wood, already perfectly dry. The fibers would interweave as if they'd grown that way - because they did. He was able to command the wood into arches, and make joints entirely unnecessary. Things just combined, and the wood flowed like water.

So did the stone. When the foundation was done, it formed into tiles by itself. Metal was woven into a stove without a single swing of a hammer, the crystals simply climbing over each other to form it. He added a chimney, traditional heating, a few layers of stuff for insulation...

It was a crude house, because, frankly, Mercury didn't know that much about how buildings worked, but it was a house. Liveable, warm, and stable. In all of... what, fifteen minutes? Maybe thirty.

Of course, his chest hurt a bit from the exercise, his ability strained, and he felt the world grow a little impatient with him. The elements would listen, of course, but usually, he was a little nicer about it. And he fed the world more mana.

Then again, all of his Titles about saving it and all did make it listen more. And he was using mana to supplant the raw reality-altering... There was a complex amount of interactions about what he was doing, and safe to say, he had a lot more juice in the tank, but not an infinite amount.

Okay, maybe a nearly infinite amount. Still.

“How many houses until you teach me?” Mercury asked.

Kuro looked at him and scoffed slightly, blowing her bangs out of her face. "Heh. You can buy our time. For a single house, we shall teach you for... half a minute. We are very busy, you see?" she said.

Looking at her, just standing there, staring at him, he doubted that last statement. "Very busy, huh," he deadpanned.

Chung elbowed him, telling him to shut up. But then, Gun-Byeong laughed and stroked his chin. "Well, well, I did always wonder how it was that we martial artists are always busy, yet have time to go into secluded cultivation for years. It's odd, isn't it?"

"How would a worthless brute like you know?" Shiro said with a scoff and a shake of her head. Then, sighing loudly, Gun-Byeong nodded.

"I will punch you in the head, Shiro."

"I'd like to see you tr-"

With a thunderous crack, the barbarian's fist smashed into the woman's nose, sending her flying. In half a breath she'd crashed through the house Mercury had just made and three more, reducing the flimsy buildings to rubble. A heartbeat passed as Mercury watched his just completed work crumble to dust, before the woman, clad in now-stained white clothing rose from a crater.

A nosebleed covered her face, staining her pristine skin, but she was otherwise unharmed. In a rough gesture, she rubbed her nose, wiping away the blood. "Oh, you've done it now you fucker."

Then, Mercury stepped between them. "You will not break the houses I build," he said softly.

Shiro frowned. "I broke nothing."

Gun-Byeong grinned. "Yeah you did. You just crashed through that place, didn't you see?"

"Stop provoking each other," Mercury said with a frown. "Gun-Byeong, I allowed you to come along because you promised to be civil."

The beastly man tilted his head, a curious frown on his lips and his arms crossed. "Or what? Might makes right, old man."

Shiro frowned even more. "Get out of my way. I will get revenge on this brute."

Mercury looked between the two. A giant of a man, covered in scars, on one side, and a frail, angelic woman on the other. Both radiating terrifying killing intent, one like staring into a lion's maw, and the other crackling like an avalanche about to break.

"Neither of you are fighting," Mercury said calmly.

A moment passed. Tension rose. And then, the first to move... was Mercury. And the first to hurt was Kuro.

<Tapestry> had warned the mopaaw of what would happen. He'd seen Kuro bend her knees before she even did it, he'd seen her fury at Gun-Byeong grow as he attacked her lover. And Mercury was so, so sick and tired of this.

With a contemptuous motion, the Dream of Starvation grew in mass. From being a set of pants, the liquid climbed up his arm, to his fingertips, forming into a vicious set of claws. Mercury coated them in <Weapon Intent>, a pale white aura that would enhance the attack. And then, he swung.

He <Carved>.

Kuro moved, feeling the attack coming. She dodged to the side, leaping through the air. But it didn't matter. <Carve> cut through connections. Mercury knew her name, and that was enough to put her in his range. In a moment, he cut off the qi to her legs.

No blood flowed, but her technique was destroyed before it even took shape. Her movement cut off. Instead of a graceful landing, the woman tumbled across the dirt - entirely unharmed, since her skin was far too tough.

A moment later, Gun-Byeong was in front of her, already swinging his fist. Mercury moved again. <Carved> again.

His attack should have bounced off the man's thick skin, but that wasn't really a defense Mercury minded. No, he cut right inside the arm. His strike hit a few tendons at the same time, and in the end, Gun-Byeong's arm simple didn't extend. Instead, it fell limply to his side.

"Huh?" the man asked, confused. There had been no pain - the injury was minor to someone like him. But his arm didn't obey anymore.

Instantly, Shiro went to capitalize. A frigid blizzard rose around her, but Mercury simply looked over. His <Grief> slithered across the floor, and her blizzard froze. The snow turned heavy and metallic, simply falling to the ground in a thick sheet, wrapping around her feet.

"The fuck?" Shiro asked quietly, as Mercury gave her a sad look. Then he shrugged.

"See?" he asked. "No one's hurt."

It was technically true since Gun-Byeong's tendons had already regrown. At best, he'd be a bit sore. The Dream of Starvation *did* have that effect where it could give people nightmares, suck the nutrients from their flesh, and make wounds harder to heal... but Mercury suppressed that. Instead, he just let the hungry weapon drink a little bit of the peak master's blood, hoping that'd satisfy it. It did.

"What in the blazing hells was that?" Gun-Byeong asked, shaking out his arm in disbelief. He stared at Mercury in confusion. "I didn't even see your attack!"

"Ah, that's cuz I cut through the internals of your body."

"Those are tempered, too. My muscles are like steel!" he complained.

Mercury just shrugged. "Steel's not that hard," he said. Gun-Byeong just stared in disbelief, but Mercury thought the man was giving himself too little credit. He'd cut down the steel emissaries of Wrath, and Gun-Byeong's flesh was tougher than those. An impressive feat to be sure, but no longer enough.

"What did you do to my ice!?" Shiro demanded, quickly walking up to him, clumps of molten metal still clinging to her boots.

Again, Mercury responded simply. "I made it so sad it didn't wanna listen anymore." As silly as it sounded, that kind of was what <Grief> did. Break apart and assimilate. The snow got infected, and turned into the ability's signature liquid metal. And it fell.

"That's stupid," the woman protested, helping Kuro off the ground.

Mercury gave a soft nod. "It is," he said solemnly. "You're welcome to be angry at me. But don't break the houses I make."

"Ugh, fine," Shiro said, looking to the side.

Gun-Byeong just shrugged. "Alright, fair enough," he said. "Don't get yourself all worked up."

The easy disregard made Mercury give the giant an iron stare. "If you need to punch something," he said. "Punch me. Simple as."

"Alright," Gun-Byeong said.

Apparently, to him, it was quite simple. In a quick, intense moment, his fist shot out and slammed into Mercury's face.

Of course, there was some resistance. Mercury was really rather tough, especially with <Tempered Body>, but he wasn't that tough. Not as tough as the master of Slaughter. Knuckles broke bone, and Mercury's face exploded into a splinter of the ice and wood it was truly made from.

Gun-Byeong stared as the person in front of him came apart in what probably looked like a spray of gore, hidden away by <Veil> and <Lie>. But Mercury was not so fragile. In <Assimilate>'s pocket dimension, he'd grown a bunch of flesh already. He could easily regrow his own head. But he didn't.

Instead, he kneeled down, reached into the earth, and withdrew a lump of wet dirt. Clay. With a slow, deliberate motion, he faced Gun-Byeong, then <Assimilated> the material. Tendrils of his magic wove throughout it, integrating it into his body. The clay wriggled under the control the skill gave him, soon shaping itself into another image of his face. A beard grew from soil, skin turning paler by the second. His hair turned silver and light enough to dance in the wind.

A dozen seconds passed, and Mercury looked fine again. His robes were intact, his pants unstained, and he looked at Gun-Byeong.

"What the fuck," the peak master said.

Mercury tilted his head. "Punch me again," he said. Gun-Byeong hesitated, so Mercury reached out, grabbed the man's hand, and placed it right up against his nose. "Come on," he said. "Punch me again."

The peak master frowned at that. Being so easily brushed off was unusual. Shiro, Kuro and Chung just stared at the unfolding events.

Slowly, Gun-Byeong drew a breath. The veins on his body bulged. Origin qi suffused his motions. "I'll leave you in a pulp, dogly disciple," he said with an odd, chilling calm.

Smiling faintly, Mercury nodded. Gun-Byeong punched. Mercury brought up a palm to catch the strike.

His palm was turned into shrapnel.

Wood and ice splintered. Liquid light streamed like blood. Mercury bled iridescent rainbows as inch by inch of his arm was annihilated. The punch landed square on his face again, taking a good chunk of his upper body with it.

[<Tempered Body> has levelled up! <Tempered Body lv. 6 -> 7>]

Mercury staggered for a moment. It has gotten dangerously close to wiping out his heart. That wouldn't have killed him, of course, but it would definitely have sucked. He was rebuilding his brain here, but his mind was far too vast to be contained by just that organ.

So, with calm motions, Mercury cast some <Magic>. Ice sprouted from his wounds, and threads of magic wove through them.

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

Threads of himself appeared from nowhere, brought into existence purely by Mercury's mind. He was like... a self-sustaining dream. As long as he believed to be, he was slowly restored to perfection. And, in this case, with <Assimilation>, it wasn't very slow at all.

Ice and stone filled the gaps. Lumps of clay rose from the ground, splattering against his arm, building out rough shapes. The Storm's Raiment surged forward, covering his skin even as the sunlight tried to scorch it. He hid himself beneath a dozen layers of diffuse smog, and when his head was finished healing, he simply reached into his inventory and put his veil back on.

"Are you quite done?" he asked Gun-Byeong.

The guild master just stared at him, blinking. "What the fuck."

Chung Nam-Cheong looked shaken. "What kind of monster are you?"

Mercury chuckled softly. "To be called a monster by the Cult of Infernal Flames..." He shook his head wistfully. "That must be some kind of twisted compliment, right?"

"It's not," Kuro said, her face crinkled with disgust. "What even are you?"

"A sorcerer," he said simply, as if it explained everything. "Someone who clings to life very much. Someone who'd love to learn from you all, and would loathe to hurt you. I let Gun-Byeong punch me, instead of hurting him, too." Mercury said all those words with a faint smile.

"Now, if you'd let me get back to work? And please, don't smash any more buildings. I'll happily repair them and get my merits, so I can learn. Your arts seem rather impressive," he said with a smile.

The three peak masters just stared at him, then averted their eyes. All at once, they decided to just let him work.

And so, Mercury made even the Cult of Infernal Flames a slightly better place. House after house sprouted up, like crocuses in spring. And at the end, he finally got to learn a little bit of cultivation.