

Chapter 6 – Fever

I pushed hard, shoving the tomahawk in until it couldn't go any farther. Given the length of it, I was fairly certain she was already dead, but wasn't about to take any chances. Pulling the spike out, I shoved it into the other eye as far as it would go, then pulled it out again. I was just about to reinsert it into the first eye at a different angle when I noticed the chitinous armor rippling back up her legs, revealing her true form. She was dead.

Her fingers relaxed, and I pulled away from her, not even registering the sting from where her claws had cut the top of my head. Her hand dropped to her side, and she remained standing for about two seconds before falling flat on her back.

I exhaled a ragged breath as I watched the chitin retract until it was gone. After scanning the grand eldress to confirm she was dead, I grabbed her dimensional pendant and then sucked her body into my own pendant. I now had two bodies stored therein, and if the situation wasn't so dramatic, I would have been tempted to make some sort of quip about a coroner's van.

Itsuki lay crumpled where he'd fallen, unconscious and breathing faintly. I stepped over and put my hand on his shoulder, then scanned him with divine sense. The physical wounds he had sustained weren't particularly gruesome and resembled clean stabs from an ice pick or something similar. However, I could tell something was wrong with him. He was feverish, with the flesh around his wounds burning even hotter.

"Itsuki, can you hear me?" There wasn't any response. I tried speaking to him with divine sense, but he didn't so much as twitch. I gently prodded his shoulder.

Dammit. I could only pray that he had simply been knocked unconscious and wasn't suffering from something worse, be it a poison or some type of cultivation technique. I threw on a Thermal Ripple Cloak, then picked Itsuki up in my arms. With my Gravitational root of energy, I could make myself lighter and could also make other objects lighter as long as I touched them. Using this to full advantage, I raced up to the top of the building and leaped from rooftop to rooftop back to where we were staying.

Once in the hotel room, I lay Itsuki on the sofa and felt his forehead while simultaneously scanning him again. He definitely had a fever.

I pulled out a Pure Cloud Pill and was about to force-feed it to him when I paused. Pure Cloud Pills were designed for general healing. They could stitch bones back together, close up puncture wounds, heal damaged organs, restore limited amounts of lost blood, and other such things. However, I couldn't remember ever hearing that they were useful in dealing with fevers, infections, and the like.

Unfortunately, I didn't have any other type of pill. The Eightfold Restoration Pill was in Itsuki's device, which was locked to me.

Even if Pure Cloud Pills didn't get rid of his fever or other symptoms, they would at least take care of any minor injuries. I force-fed him the pill, and as I watched his wounds close, I gently fingered the scratches on my scalp. They were bleeding and were deep enough that they would probably require stitches if I didn't use a pill. There was no way I was going into the hospital, so I also consumed a Pure Cloud Pill.

I let a minute or two go by to make sure the pills had done their work, then scanned Itsuki again. He was even hotter than before.

I paced back and forth in the apartment for a minute, trying to decide what to do. My first option as I saw it was to try to treat Itsuki by mundane means. Maybe ice packs and over-the-counter medication could keep the fever in check until his body fought off whatever was troubling him. But could an ordinary immune system deal with the sting of that bizarre armor?

My other option would be to get in touch with Yu Yitai, but I didn't want to do that unless I was sure it was necessary. I would have to use SimpleWE, and there was no guarantee he would be at the keyboard if I didn't message at one of the preappointed times. And though we all had distress talismans, they linked to the central talisman bank in the Ninth Earth, not to Yu Yitai personally.

I went back to Itsuki and knelt next to him. "What happened to you?"

I pulled his clothing aside to examine the spot where the puncture wounds had been before the Pure Cloud Pill did its work. My heart sank. There were three greenish-purple marks on his skin, almost like bruises, except how could bruises have formed this quickly?

I wasn't going to gamble with Itsuki's life. There was no damn way I was going to let him die on my watch!

Dragging out the computer, I plugged it in, set everything up, and connected to our secure chat client. By the time the chat window opened, I felt like an hour had gone by, but it was only minutes.

928-12-08 09:08 AM – WF: EMERGENCY SITUATION, ITSUKI IS BADLY HURT.

There would always be time to talk about Shen Xiang later, I wanted to make sure I got Yu Yitai's full attention regarding Itsuki and his injury.

After thirty seconds passed, there was no response. I gnawed the inside of my cheek as a minute went by.

Why just sit here doing nothing? I thought, and I quickly typed out a message detailing the symptoms.

Two minutes were gone, and the time limit was approaching, so I sent one more message.

928-12-08 09:11 AM – WF: HELP!!!

Two more minutes passed.

928-12-08 09:13 AM – YOU HAVE BEEN LOGGED OFF.

Trying not to curse, I powered down the computer.

I checked Itsuki again, but unfortunately, I wasn't skilled enough with either physical touch or divine sense to make a judgment call on how bad his fever was. I needed a thermometer, and I felt like smacking myself in the face when I realized that I hadn't packed one in the first aid kit I kept in my dimensional pendant.

"Just hold on a minute, Itsuki, I'll be right back."

I hurried out the door and down the street to a pharmacy, where I bought a thermometer, some additional ice packs to supplement those I already had in my kit, a few types of generic medicine, and some rehydration fluid in case he started sweating badly.

I was back fifteen minutes later, and thankfully he didn't seem to have gotten any worse. I took his temperature. 102°F. Bad, but not horrifically bad.

Not sure if I should administer the generic medicine, I pulled a chair over and sat next to the couch to watch him. When I shoved my hands in my pockets at some point, they found Shen Xiang's dimensional pendant, which I pulled out and examined. Unfortunately, the process of breaking into it would take at least a day or two, and there wasn't even a guarantee there was something inside that could help him.

Rain beat against the window, then faded into what sounded like a drizzle. An hour passed.

I couldn't just sit around doing nothing, so I hooked up the computer again and connected to SimpleWE. Sending this many messages wasn't safe, but risks be damned.

There still wasn't a return message from Yu Yitai, so I opened a new chat window, this one to Svea's account.

928-12-08 09:40 AM – WF: SVEA, ARE YOU THERE?

Thirty seconds passed.

928-12-08 09:40 AM – SG: HEY, MR. DETECTIVE. WHAT'S GOING ON?

928-12-08 09:41 AM – WF: A BIT OF AN EMERGENCY. ITSUKI IS HURT. BAD. MAYBE POISONED OR SOMETHING. I'M NOT SURE. YU YITAI ISN'T RESPONDING TO ANY MESSAGES.

928-12-08 09:41 AM – SG: OKAY, HOLD ON A SEC. I MIGHT BE ABLE TO GET A RESPONSE FROM YYT.

Two minutes crawled by while I stared at the monitor.

928-12-08 09:43 AM – SG: HE'S NOT GETTING BACK TO ME EITHER. LET ME GET ELENA. SHE'S THE ALCHEMIST, NOT ME.

Thirty seconds went by. There were now only two minutes of safe chat time remaining.

928-12-08 09:43 AM – SG: ELENA'S RIGHT HERE. SHE DOESN'T TYPE FAST SO I'LL RELAY THE INFO. WHAT'S ITSUKI'S SITUATION?

928-12-08 09:44 AM – WF: WE FOUGHT ANOTHER TRAITOR, GRAND ELDRRESS SHEN XIANG. SHE HAD SOME SORT OF INSECT-LIKE ARMOR THAT MADE HER ALMOST COMPLETELY INVULNERABLE. AT ONE POINT, SHE STABBED ITSUKI WITH HER HAND, EXCEPT IT LOOKED LIKE A STINGER OF SOME SORT. HE HASN'T WOKEN UP SINCE THEN. I FED HIM A PURE CLOUD PILL, IT HEALED THE WOUNDS, BUT THE SPOT WHERE SHE STABBED HIM IS PURPLE AND GREEN. AND THE EFFECTS SEEM TO BE SPREADING. HE HAS A 102° FEVER.

I watched the screen as the seconds slowly drained away. Soon, there were only twenty seconds left before we were supposed to end the chat. My heartbeat seemed to sync with the clock as the twenty seconds turned into ten, then five.

928-12-08 09:44 AM – SG: WE'RE COMING TO YOU. I'LL BOOK A HIGH-SPEED VERT-RAIL. WHERE ARE YOU?

I was taken aback, but knew there were only seconds to spare. I typed in the name and address of the hotel and my room number.

928-12-08 09:44 AM – SG HAS LOGGED OFF.

At the five-minute mark, the chat client shut down. Again, I packed up the computer and returned to Itsuki's side.

Now, all I could do was wait.

It took Svea and Elena four hours to reach me, although watching that time pass on the wall clock made it seem like a lot longer. The entire time, I couldn't stop thinking about what would happen if Itsuki died before they arrived. It wouldn't be fair. But then again, life wasn't fair. If I hadn't learned that after what happened to both Xiaoli and Hina, then I was a fool. Could this be Universal karma turning its attention to Itsuki? Cosmic cause and effect coming back around to bite him? I would have laughed at such talk only a few months ago. But having felt the effects of a soul oath, I couldn't laugh any longer.

My fears were unfounded. Itsuki remained in roughly the same condition the whole time. At one point his fever climbed to 104 before dropping back down to about 101.

Finally, shortly after I'd had some instant noodles for lunch, I heard a knock on the door.

I almost went to check the peephole, but then remembered I could just scan the hallway with divine sense. It was Svea and Elena.

I unbolted the door and eased it open, and Elena fell into my arms. My heartbeat quickened. It had only been a few weeks since we'd seen each other, but it felt like years to me. Her lips met mine, and time seemed to slow. For those few short seconds, I forgot about the mission, about Elder Qing, Shen Xiang, and Itsuki. I wrapped my arms around Elena's waist and kissed her back, and everything in the world was perfect.

“Hey Mr. Detective,” Svea said, slipping past us with her usual duffel bag full of equipment.

“Hey to you, too.”

Elena pulled away from me and stepped over to the couch to look at Itsuki. “Has his condition changed?”

“His fever spiked about an hour ago, then dropped a bit. Other than that, no.”

Svea had already cracked open an energy drink and started setting up her computer station. She’d changed her hair color. It was now bright pink and artificially wavy, falling messily over a high-collared black leather jacket and tight denim pants tucked into brown work boots. Elena was dressed similarly, except her jacket was blue, and she wore sneakers instead of boots.

Elena put her hand on Itsuki’s forehead, then pulled his arm out and took his pulse. “Is there anything you can give me to examine from Shen Xiang? A piece of that armor that chipped off? Maybe the tip of the stinger?”

“I have her on ice in my dimensional pendant,” I replied. “But the armor vanished after she died.”

“Let me see her.”

I went into the bathroom, extracting Shen Xiang’s corpse and putting it into the bathtub. Grabbing the hand the armor had spread from, I said, “Look here. See that tattoo-like mark? I’m pretty sure the armor comes out of there.”

Elena took the hand and examined the mark. I felt her divine sense at work. “Strange. I’ve never heard of anything like this.” She produced a few thin test tubes along with a scraper from her jacket and tried to shave some of the mark off. It didn’t work. “All right, put her back.”

Back out in the living room, Svea was almost done with her computer station.

“Svea, can you be a dear and make some room for my alchemist setup?” Elena asked.

“Sure.” Svea scooted her equipment into the corner of the kitchen table while Elena pulled various items out of her backpack, including a small copper pill furnace, a burner, vials, packets, and tools.

Next, she did some tests, drawing some of Itsuki's blood as well as taking hair and skin samples.

While Elena worked, Svea powered up her computer and said, "I'm going to try one more time to reach the big boss."

Meanwhile, I sat off to the side feeling completely useless.

"No go," Svea said about five minutes later. "He's totally silent."

"Of all the times to disappear," I said.

"I'm going to check in on some of the cultivator forums and chat groups I know. See if anyone is talking about anything that might help."

Elena poured a glowing green liquid from her cauldron into a test tube, which she swirled three times before using her hand to blow some of the aroma toward her nose. "Aha."

"What is it?" I asked.

"Hold on." She proceeded to clean up her alchemy equipment, then went over and felt Itsuki's pulse again. "Okay, yes. He's infected with some sort of parasite. There's a toxin at work as well, but my guess is that it's a byproduct of the parasites. Given that, the best bet is going to be something you're familiar with, Wang Fan."

"Vimalā Balm," I said.

"Yeah. And I have some bad news."

"Elena, if you say you're missing cubeb pepper, I swear...."

"At least you know what it looks like, right?"

"After what happened last time, you didn't just keep some in your pendant?"

"I did. But... I used it a few days ago to make some soup."

I buried my face in my palm.

Svea looked back and forth between us. “There’s obviously a cubeb pepper story that I haven’t been told, am I right?”

“I’ll explain while Wang Fan’s out,” Elena said. She stepped toward me, removed my palm from my face, and kissed me again. “This time, just keep looking until you find it. There’s no rush like last time. He seems stable. While you’re gone, I’m going to work on something else to help with the fever.”

Sighing, I stepped to the door and opened it. “I’ll be back in less than forty-five minutes.”