

Chapter 299: Travelling Healers

Mercury felt miserable. He was sweaty, tired, every muscle on his body ached. He was panting, out of breath, felt sticky and disgusting, and the sun was still burning his skin off on top of that. He dropped the heavy pack behind him, the enormous backpack denting the ground. And yet, he was not the most miserable person.

In front of him laid a man missing both his legs.

Yoshida Keiko kneeled in front of the man, humming softly as she held her hands out. "Lemongrass."

He listened. With swift motions, he reached his hands into the stupid backpack and grabbed their supplies. He placed the herbs in the woman's outstretched hand, and while she applied a salve, he grabbed their prepared bandages and medicinal pills. Most pills couldn't bring limbs back, especially for mortals, but they could do their best.

The man had gotten hurt in a spirit stone mining accident. Cultivators often used mortals for their dirty works, running operations using dozens of them to grow spiritual grain, or harvest stones rich in qi. This man, to them, was just a cog in the machine.

A tool, as much as anyone else was, to help them reach their ultimate ascension. People, after all, were *resources*.

Being a healer in the martial world meant seeing injury. It meant watching men scream their lungs hoarse while they bled out from stumps where their limbs had once been. It means walking across battlefields with hundreds of bodies in the hopes of finding someone who still breathed.

That was how one got into the profession, usually. Healers, for the most part, didn't recruit the rich and wealthy. No one wanted to be a healer. No, healers picked up orphans. Dying, starving children left in the ashes where the powerful walked. They took the lost and destitute, because there was nowhere else to go.

Mercury found, once more, that he hated the martial world.

This casual cruelty was disgusting. He watched as Keiko, wordlessly, with steady, swift motions, stitched up flaps of skin. She fed the man alchemical concoctions most cultivators

would have considered more worthwhile than his life. She bandaged his legs, and even pulled a simple wooden wheelchair from her endless bag. Then she patted the sweating, panting man on the shoulder, told him to hang onto life, declared the treatment complete, and got up.

She walked two steps over, to the next patient from the same accident. Rocky shrapnel embedded in his eye, the wound swollen and showing the beginnings of infection. "Tweezers," she said sternly. Mercury handed over the tool. Then he watched, as the old woman pulled stones from a shredded eyeball.

"Magical healing is all well and good," she said, accompanied by a clink as another rock was dropped to the ground. "But being a healer is bloody work. It's why no one wants to do it. It churns the stomach. It horrifies people." Clink. "But the best potion can only do so much against blood loss." Clink.

Mercury knew about that, of course. He'd watched a man bleed out in his arms, even as he fed the poor guy potions, because they just weren't good enough. Mercury could regenerate from almost anything. Zyl, like a starfish, could regrow arms within hours or days. Faster, with help.

But there were average people on Chronagen. People who worked their daily jobs. Who grew to do the things they wanted to do, yes, but who never reached the supernatural levels of powers. They were good at the things they cared about, and some were simply miserable and cared about little.

And there was absolutely nothing wrong with that. People were free to live peacefully, and without much struggle. In some ways, Mercury envied them. In other ways... he was a curious idiot, who couldn't go a page without driving himself to the brink of death, so maybe that kinda lifestyle just wasn't what he was cut out for.

Of course, peaceful people got hurt during war. And that's why it was the duty of those who could to look out for the weak.

Keiko could, and so could Mercury. Because they chose to, they sat in a half-abandoned mineshaft, bandaging up people who had been hurt by the idiots of those more powerful than them.

They'd dug into a cave filled with sulphur gas, and lit a torch. That was all that happened. And now people were hurt, so they got healed.

“Divine doctor-” someone started, only for Keiko to give them a death glare.

“Say those words one more time and I’m cutting your tongue out and nailing it on the wall as a warning,” she spat angrily, then shoved another pill into someone’s mouth. But even in her anger, she remained a healer. Mercury watched her work, and he learnt.

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Travelling with Keiko was different than with Zyl and himself. The old lady walked at a leisurely, slow pace. She didn’t seem in a hurry to get anywhere, nor like there were any problems to solve. But she also seemed entirely uninterested in the journey itself. At almost all times she would be drawing, taking notes, or foraging for things.

Every few steps she’d dart off the road to grab some flower or berry or bushel, then promptly toss it into the pack Mercury carried. His shoulders still creaked under its oppressive weight. But he managed to carry it mostly without complaint.

Okay, according to Zyl he was complaining more than a little, but that dragon was too sensitive, so Mercury politely disregarded that notion and kept complaining, in his humble opinion, very little.

Every few days, they’d stop in a new place. Some were mundane, normal villages with normal problems. Others had just been ransacked. They were attacked by bandits twice, and saved hostages on both accounts. Zyl made quick excursions to turn in the bandits and collect the bounties, handing them over to local lords to go to prison.

It was, in Mercury’s opinion, pretty peaceful, even if gruesome sometimes. They picked up kids and dropped them off at the nearest semi-responsible adult. Saving people from certain death, and then placing them in the lap of someone who could at least remotely handle the responsibility.

Life-changing work, Mercury thought, for better or for worse. Sometimes he wondered if it was even worth it, when they walked by yet another charred spot of land. The further east they headed, in fact, the more common these kinds of smaller battlefields became.

“People get more prideful when you head into these mountains,” Keiko explained softly. They had been slowly trudging uphill, reaching steeper, rockier sections with only hardy greenery. “They bash heads over minor differences, and the myriad clans here are almost always fighting over something. And that means corpses.”

She dragged her hand along the mountain wall, over a spot of dried blood that had been chipped and worn by recent winds, yet not washed away by rains. They'd encountered dozens of similar splotches. "It's not the mountains of corpses from a fight of sects, but it's regular. Every few days, someone bashes another's head in. Healers? Rare."

The old woman shook her head with distaste. "No, people die in indignity here. They get into a dumb fistfight, then they bleed out in a ditch. They fight for pride, over a bag of coins, over a sheep, over a meal. It's a tragedy, that's what it is."

Usually, she didn't speak much. Keiko was happy to order Mercury around, and to point out pieces of knowledge. This was the third thing she was talkative about: Anger.

At her heart, Keiko was angry at the world. She found it so pathetic, so distasteful, the way people treated each other. "Life is already fleeting," she often said. "I know that. So why do people make it even shorter? Why get into a fight that loses you decades of life, over what? Nothing. It's pathetic."

Now, in this place, it was more noticeable than ever. She rubbed the dried blood between her fingers, leaving it to slowly flake to the ground. Then, she sighed, closed her eyes wearily, breathed in for a long moment, and walked forward once more. Up and up the spiraling mountain path.

"Killing makes you pathetic, Mercury," she said, more quietly than usual. "Remember that."

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They found a clan village not too long later. Just another day of walking. It was nestled atop the mountains, huts spreading across plateaus, fielding wooden fences and palisades to ward off monsters and attackers. They'd flattened and carved out bits from the mountain, making more spaces for longhouses.

Wood or nature Cultivators must have helped build the place, or they imported lumber, since the sparse vegetation in the mountains probably wouldn't have been ideal for the wooden construction. Mercury regarded the village with curiosity, when Keiko walked up to the front door and knocked.

It was a three-meter tall, thick wooden gate, and the old woman looked tiny in comparison to it. When her aged knuckles rasped against the wood, someone appeared atop the entrance, a guard of some sort, given the spears and battered leather, Mercury guessed.

“Who goes there?” the man demanded, voice muffled only slightly by his thick beard.

The aged woman gave a small smile. “A healer and her apprentice,” she said.

“A healer?” the guard asked, eyeing her. “I believe that much, but what about him?” he nodded at Zyl, who stood there in his elegant suit, hair immaculate, as if he had just been cut from a model catalogue.

Tilting his head slightly, the dragon shrugged. “No one special,” he said. “Just the apprentice’s boyfriend, with a bit of travellust.”

Furrowing his brows, the guard grumbled under his breath. For a moment, he disappeared behind the walls again. Mercury, of course, easily heard the entire conversation behind there, debating that they did need healers but there was a risk of enemy forces. In the end, it seems they agreed on something that Mercury found a little distasteful.

“Enter,” the guard grumbled, pulling open the gate and letting them walk in. Then, quickly, he shoved paper talismans at them. “Wear these.”

“What are they for?” Mercury asked, feigning ignorance. He knew very well that they were bombs, rigged to explode on a distant command.

The guard glared at him, then slowly spoke. “Identifying talismans. They’ll sound an alarm if you step into restricted areas.”

That much wasn’t true. Mercury could see that this clan was not well-off enough to afford the kinds of formations that would require. No, he imagined they simply had a somewhat talented talisman artist with some kind of distant activation Skill. But that was fine. The bombs wouldn’t hurt anyone in their party overly much. Even Keiko was tough as nails, after all.

So, he shrugged and accepted the explanation, visually making the guard ease up. “Follow me,” the gruff man commanded, leaving a younger, yawning colleague to man the gate. He led them through the village with swift, determined steps, and Mercury looked around himself, taking it all in.

It was a simple kind of life. People were doing all the things that were necessary for survival. They tilled the soil, reared meagre crops, and raised animals. He saw them washing clothes in basins fed by small streams, carrying water to their homes, baking loaves of bread. Everything he expected, of course, except for the faint smell of rot.

That smell only grew stronger as they walked closer to the fanciest building in the village. It was something of a mansion, with a courtyard that had straw training dummies set up, and youths who clumsily hit those with wooden swords. A few boys and girls were also engaged in sparring matches, smacking each other over the head.

But that was not where the rot came from. That was from inside the compound, where they were led down a stairwell, into a room that was more dungeon than hospital. It was a dim room, with stale air, where a half dozen adults and as many kids laid writhing.

Keiko wrinkled her nose as she saw the injuries. Pieces of skin gone fetid, rotting off their bodies. Breaths came shallow, exhausted, and there were red pustules forming on the sick. "What happened to them?" she asked.

"A cultivator came by," the guard said regretfully. "She demanded to be hosted, fed, clothed and housed. We acquiesced many demands, but then she asked for our finest calves to slaughter. The chief said we wouldn't make it through winter and declined. So she attacked." He made a sweeping gesture at the bodies. "Apparently, she cast a blood-curse on our people. Our chief was reduced to a smear on the wall."

Grim. Mercury's face twisted in disgust, but Keiko just nodded professionally. "A blood curse, then," she repeated. "That's a chore, but we'll excise it. But we'll need to move the patients. Somewhere with more ventilation, chop chop," she said. Then, the frail old woman promptly pulled out a stretcher from the bag, placed one of the bodies on it, then carried the poor man by herself.

Under the suddenly wide eyes of the guard, Mercury shrugged and went about doing the same himself.

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"Blood curses are tricky," Keiko explained, heating a needle over a fire to sterilize it, "because they feed on the energies of the body. If I fed these people healing elixirs, it would just make them worse. We have to remove the plague first."

"How do we go about doing that?" Mercury asked.

The old healer gave him a sideways glance and a smirk. "*Carefully*," she said. "We do it carefully. Because the second bad thing about blood curses is that they can spread quickly and easily. So, we'll want an open space or we'll get sick ourselves."

They'd laid the sick bodies down in the open sun, on an inner courtyard, staining the stone with fetid blood. It was dirty, but it was better than downstairs. The air wasn't as stale here, even if Mercury felt himself being burnt by the sun. It was just his skin, still. He resisted.

As Keiko explained, he nodded along, handing her whatever tools she needed, as she slowly prepared them for an operation, laying them out on a piece of cloth after turning them red hot. And letting them cool. Eventually, when she was ready, they started the operation.

It was disgusting.

The guard had to excuse himself because he felt like vomiting. Zyl even had to step outside the courtyard. Keiko moved with practiced precision, sometimes glancing at Mercury who just watched.

He felt the disgust, the distaste at the way human flesh was splayed open before him, yes. But he also washed it away. His <Babbling Brook> let him focus through the discomfort, making it little more than background noise. He saw the steady-handed cuts, the way Keiko identified diseased flesh, and used precise applications of qi to burn away the curse.

That was, perhaps, the most impressive part of the healing. She'd place her hand on dessicated skin, and a myriad of tiny bands of qi would sink into the patient. She used healing aspected energy, for the most part, but when it came to destroying the curse, she wielded other ones, too. Fire and metal, primarily.

She wielded the threads so precisely as they carved through the body, destroying nodes of diseased flesh, then healing them back healthily moments later. Her scalpel and her supernatural powers made quick work of the curse, but even then it was a messy business. She'd pick out pieces of squelching flesh then burn them to ash, taking care to get as little into the wounds as possible.

The woman she worked on still almost died.

It was depressing to see. How she writhed with pain every time Keiko channelled metal through her veins, feeble attempts to thrash and beat away the old woman failing because of her own waning strength. How her breath turned so very shallow, her heart fluttering like a hummingbird.

Then it stopped.

Her heartbeat gave out halfway through the surgery. Keiko looked at Mercury for a moment, and sighed. "Chest compressions," she commanded simply, reaching into her bag and fetching a healing elixir.

Swallowing heavily, Mercury placed his hands on the woman's dying chest and pushed. Her ribs creaked and her chest went down and up again. Faint bits of blood dribbled from incisions. Mercury pumped her heart again, filling her lungs with air using <Rainfall>.

Keiko gently placed a healing pill into the woman's mouth, watching it dissolve on her tongue. Almost instantly, her eyelids fluttered open. Then, she writhed in agony.

Mercury watched her blood light on fire, her muscles rotting faster than before, and Keiko swung her scalpel in wide swathes. It had turned from careful operation to risk-managing butchery. Chunks of flesh were discarded before the rot could spread, and it was a damn shame, too. Because her heart still wasn't beating.

Second by second Mercury kept pushing the woman's chest in, her bones struggling under the strain. The rot tried to latch onto them too, and he felt one of her ribs give for a moment. It was depressing. It felt like he was pushing the life out of the poor girl. If the guard had still been there, he might have tried to kill them for their cruelty.

And in all of it, Keiko didn't even blink. She just kept working, sweat slowly gathering on her brow as she did the best she could as fast as she could. Despite his misgivings, Mercury didn't stop either. In fact, he did his best to observe the process. See how Keiko wielded her energy, what she cut away, and how she was trying to preserve the woman's life.

The old healer used even more complex techniques, threading healing and destruction to excise the curse, then mend flesh right after. She stitched wounds together that would heal naturally with motions that gave off a faint hum as they cut the air. She did her best, she really did.

Despite that, the woman's heart still didn't resume beating.

Mercury loathed that. It felt so disgusting, watching life slip through his fingers like that. And what for? Because someone wasn't fed the meal they wanted? It was horrid. He hated it. People didn't deserve to die for that.

He looked at the woman, and the way he saw life leech from her. The detachment of Keiko, who'd had patients die on her dozens, maybe hundreds of times. It was the first time he felt properly powerless, because... what was he to do?

Sure, he could feed the woman with <Grain of Infinity>, but that would only strengthen the curse. He could try to stem the bleeding with the Stifled Silence, but then, her blood wouldn't flow properly either. He could... do what, exactly? Just what could he do?

<Answer> triggered from the question.

It was a bizarre sensation. Knowledge suddenly flooded his head when he had gritted his teeth and known he'd watch someone die. But there was an answer, a combination of his abilities that might just save her. He blinked, for just a second, forgetting to do the chest compressions.

Keiko glared at him, slapping his hands. "Work," she said. "We're not done yet."

Mercury agreed with that sentiment. In fact, he agreed very much. There was something he was good at, after all. Maybe even better than Keiko. He did not know as much about the human body as she did, not about sicknesses and disease. But he did know a good bit about finding things and connections.

So, he followed the blueprint laid out by the <Answer> he got gifted.

First, his mind blossomed. He split it into five zeyjn, and then, he subdivided those even further. A cascade of mental processing that was supported by his <Multitasking> Skill. He let the feeling of being split many ways settle for a moment, then set to work in perfect coordination.

For a moment, he watched the woman, intently. He stared into her, into the very <Tapestry> that connected things - and he spotted two separate entities. Her, and the curse that was almost alive. A parasite, clinging to her because of a faint connection to some other woman.

With his normal sight, it was hard to see, only manifesting as rotten flesh, but <Tapestry>? That could find something based on the very concept it was, on what it was connected to. So, he found the curse.

Then, all at once, he <Carved> it away.

One of his first Skills, starting as a simple cut, had grown to be able to target something through a connection. Well, in a way, he was connected to the blood curse. He kind of hated it, after all.

And that was enough to find its target. A few hundred instances of <Carve> flashed out all at once, separating diseased flesh from healthy one. The woman's body jolted once, as if in

shock, but Keiko's eyes widened. In a flash, the old healer fed the poor lady another pill, and her wounds began mending.

Of course, there were still pieces of the blood curse stuck in her body... but that was also something Mercury could solve. For a brief moment, he used <Voidwalker>, only on his arm. He phased through the woman's skin, not interfacing with the reality around her, and then <Assimilated> the pieces of cursed flesh still floating around in her.

Instantly, the curse tried to devour him, too. It infected his blood, and moved to spread through his body... but then it slowed.

Mercury simply halted his circulation. His heartbeat stopped. He felt his brain begin to suffocate, but he didn't need it. With a careful motion, he withdrew his hand, then let it return back to reality, phasing in through the weave that delineated what was from what wasn't. Keiko stared at him.

His hand was covered in bloody pustules and sick rot. It was decaying as he watched. But he just shrugged, then covered the limb with his Dream of Starvation.

The stygian metal crawled over him, coating his hand in moments. A second later, a dozen needles shot into his skin, carving through his resistances and drinking his blood. The Dream of Starvation had always been a hungry weapon, and when Mercury willingly offered it a hand, it did not wait long.

After about two seconds, it had eaten the limb whole. Mercury's hand, alongside the blood curse, was gone, replaced by a blob of black metal. He felt that the Dream of Starvation could have hurt his mind, but didn't, since it was still his weapon, even if it was a little temperamental sometimes.

In a swift motion, he pulled off the piece of metal that replaced his hand, letting it fuse back with the rest of the weapon. Then, he regrew his lost limb in about three seconds of time.

Once he was healthy again, he was able to get a good look at the patient in front of them. She was breathing. Her hair clung to her face, covered in sweat, but her heart was beating, and her flesh stitching itself back together, now a healthy red rather than a dessicated crimson.

Keiko graced Mercury's thin smile with a stern nod. "Good," she said. "Coming up with solutions on the fly is important. Next patient?" she asked.

Mercury nodded once. "Next patient," he said.