

Chapter 670

Sadness Porridge

Hana Shavar let out a happy moan as she stirred in half-slumber before her head cleared as she came fully awake. Despite herself, she couldn't help but stretch out, luxuriating in the cloud bed that felt far too light to support her weight, while doing so perfectly, moulding to her body.

Propping herself up on her elbows, she looked around. The room was small, one of several on the hospital's top floor set aside for the people running the camp to get some rest. Arabelle Remore had sent her stumbling in, following Hana's afternoon meeting with Asano. She barely managed to yank off her clothes before collapsing into the cloud bed, barely registering the enveloping softness before sleep took her. Taking her first proper look around, although the room was small and almost featureless, it was cosy, with a soft light that was slowly growing brighter, allowing her sleepy eyes to adjust.

The room was quite different from the clean and clinical décor that comprised the rest of the hospital. While this room contained only a bed and a bedside table, the cloud-construct nature of the building was on full display. While white was the predominant colour, soft hues of blue and orange gradated softly to break up the monochrome.

She looked to the bedside table where the clothes she had roughly pulled off before falling into slumber had been cleaned and neatly folded. She grabbed her pocket watch, sitting atop the clothes, and frowned as she checked the time. After meeting Asano in the afternoon, she'd spoken with Arabelle, issued some directives for while she was resting, and been asleep within half an hour. One of those directives had been to wake her in the evening, but she had been left to rest for hours past the turn of midnight.

Navigating her way out of the cloud bed was a little odd, like escaping the fluffiest of marshmallows. Her feet sank ankle-deep into the lush, airy softness of a floor that was almost as luxurious as the bed. The pull to let herself fall back and return to slumber was so strong that she examined her aura for undue external influence, before scolding herself for laziness.

She glared at her clothes on the bedside table. She had been half-dead on her feet, but she clearly remembered leaving them crumpled on the floor. Even in the depths of exhausted sopor, anyone approaching her should have stirred her to wakefulness. Who had managed to come in, take her clothes, wash, and then return them, all without tweaking her aura senses? The obvious candidate was Asano, despite his silver rank. The combination of his remarkable aura and dominion over the cloud house might have made

it possible. After all, the one aspect of the room she was in was that her senses could not penetrate the walls.

She swept her magic and aura senses over the clothes, looking for any trace of tampering. After finding nothing she pulled them on, ignoring the pang of regret as her shoes went on, separating her feet from a floor she would have happily slept on every night for the rest of her life.

She needed to get out of the room and clear her head before she took her clothes back off and crawled back into bed. She looked to the door, delineated in the blue and orange of a winter sunset. The door didn't have a handle but a patch on the wall next to it that emitted a gentle glow. She pressed her hand against it and the doorway dissolved into mist, revealing Jason Asano leaning against the opposite wall. He held out a plate with a gently steaming fried sandwich on it.

"Morning, sunshine."

Jason watched as the door dissolved to reveal the high priestess. Her clothes were neat and clean, but she herself looked drowsy, her vibrant green eyes half-closed. Her light brown hair was only slightly mussed, despite falling well below her shoulders, somehow looking more sensual than dishevelled. He wondered absently if that was a gold-rank thing or if she was just one of those people, like Rufus, who looked great under any circumstances.

If Jason looked even close to that astounding, first thing after waking up, he wouldn't have needed to get so good at cooking breakfast food. But he did, which inspired his confidence in the fried vegetable and egg sandwich with spicy relish he held out for her.

"Morning, sunshine."

"Did you take my clothes?" she demanded.

He looked her up and down.

"You're wearing your clothes."

"My clean, pressed clothes. Someone came into my room and did that."

"That would be Shade, my shadow familiar. I have no interest in the goings-on inside your room."

"Then how did you know I was waking up, to be here with a hot sandwich?"

"This is my house, Priestess. I see everything."

"I just put my clothes on."

"Uh... Ah, well. When I say 'see,' that's more of a metaphor. I *knew* that you were awake and getting dressed, but I wasn't actually watching."

“But it’s within your power to watch, isn’t it? Without me knowing?”

“It is.”

“Then I just have to trust that you didn’t look?”

“You do, but don’t flatter yourself, Priestess.”

Her eyebrows shot up and he flashed her a grin.

“Are you the one who stopped me from being woken up Mr Asa... Mr Miller?”

“That was your designated mental health professional,” Jason told her. “Who I see explained my identity situation.”

“Why did you even tell me your real name?”

“I like to put an honest foot forward,” he said. “What you see is what you get with me.”

“I have no idea what I’m seeing when I look at you.”

“Which is exactly what to expect going forward, from what I’m told. Are you going to take this sandwich, or should I eat it myself?”

“I’m fine eating spirit coins.”

“Not in this house.”

Jason didn’t have the time he would like to focus on magical cooking. Experts could produce moderate but long-lasting boons with their food, but Jason focused elsewhere. By giving up on the trickiest part of cooking magic, he was able to use high-rank ingredients for the most fundamental aspects of cooking: taste and nutrition. As such, the sandwich on the plate he was holding could be swapped out for the gold coin or ten silver coins a gold ranker needed.

Such food also cost noticeably less than the coins it replaced, with the added benefit of tasting like food and not like a car battery. This was one of the key reasons that gold-rankers favoured high-magic zones, even if they weren’t actively adventuring. Where the production of high-ranking food ingredients was viable, the cost of gold-rank living went down while quality of life went up.

Jason contemplated this as he watched her peer at the sandwich with suspicion, even as her nostrils flared at the delectable smell of it. She took the plate from his hands.

“Thank you, I’m going to eat it walking,” she said and immediately set off down the hall.

“Uh, priestess?”

She stopped and looked back.

“Yes?”

“Elevating platform is in the other direction.”

“I’m certain it was in this direction.”

“It was, yes. When you went to sleep.”

“It moved?”

“Yes. So did the room you were sleeping in. Cloud-stuff makes renovations fairly easy.”

“I didn’t think you could make major structural changes to a cloud construct on this scale without breaking it down first.”

“Mine is a little more flexible than most, although there are still some hard limits.”

“Why would you change things around?”

“Some of the teams found towns where people were in the process of having worms implanted. My friend Carlos figured out how to extract the worms without killing the host if they catch the process early enough. I had to make room for an appropriate facility, though. The administration area's a bit crowded now, the shower queues are a little longer and there's not quite as much space for frozen food. Also, I had to give up my big empty office for watching the camp from.”

“Your friend Carlos? Do you mean Priest Quilido?”

“That’s the bloke.”

“You are friends with a lot of powerful and prestigious healers.”

“I see a lot of damage.”

He felt her gaze rest on his scars.

“Why did my god visit you?” she asked softly.

He almost gave a flippant answer but stopped himself.

“I’m not going to tell you that,” he said gently. “You have to get to know me better before I’ll talk about something like that, and I don’t think that will happen. And you won’t even eat my sandwich.”

“Why are you so concerned with this sandwich?”

“Because you’re wasting the sandwich. The plate is enchanted to keep it warm, but it’s fried food. It’s pretty light, but you will see some congealing if you just let it sit there.”

“Why are you always trying to make me eat and drink?”

“Feeding people is kind of my thing. I made that myself, just so you know. The sandwich, not the plate. It’s a lot better than the food they’re getting down in the cafeteria.”

“What they’re getting in the cafeteria has nutrition, energy and even mild healing properties. It was designed specifically for normal-rank people that have experienced trauma and is what their bodies need.”

“Their bodies, sure, but gruel is not what their souls need.”

“It doesn’t matter how it looks or tastes.”

“That came through very clearly when I tried some. While you’ve been asleep, I’ve been working with your head of food distribution to fix the recipe.”

“This may be your house, Asano, but this is my camp. Who gave you permission to do that?”

“Arabelle. She shares my opinion that people will recover faster if their food doesn’t taste like it was made in a gulag.”

“What’s a gulag?”

“A forced labour camp. These people have been through enough without feeding them sadness porridge.”

“Just take me to wherever the administration area is.”

“We have to talk first.”

“About what?”

“Arabelle tells me that you’ve been in the fight against the messengers?”

“Yes.”

“The messengers haven’t attacked the teams handling the towns in the south where worm-breeding sites have been found. What does that tell you?”

“That either the attacks on their strongholds put them on the back foot, the messengers were not ready for us to hit the towns or they intend to strike the city instead.”

“And if they intend to attack the city...”

“Then the best time will be leading up to dawn.”

She checked her watch again.

“Most likely sometime in the next few hours,” she said.

“City administration has put the city on a heightened alert level, just in case.

Preparations to get the population into the monster attack bunkers as soon as an attack begins were started yesterday. The Adventure Society is organising combat response teams and the Magic Society is keeping a close eye on the defence infrastructure.”

“I need to organise the evacuee camp response.”

“Already being done. You have effective subordinates, which is the mark of a good leader.”

“Why are you the one telling me all this, instead of one of those subordinates?”

“Because the plan, if there is an attack, is to reconfigure the two cloud palaces into defence bunkers for the people in the camp. And there are things you will need to know about that before it happens.”

“Such as?”

“If I turn this place into a bunker, your god won’t be able to reach you inside. That goes for every priest and every god, but yours is the one with the most people in camp.”

Jason could see the walls go up in her body language.

“What are you talking about?” she asked.

“Just what I said. Your powers should still work fine, but you won’t be able to hear the voice of your god.”

“I’ve experienced that before when I went into astral spaces to confront the Builder cult. Does your cloud house have the power to create a dimensional space outside the world?”

“No. It’s more like... have you ever entered the core areas of another god’s temple?”

She narrowed her eyes at him.

“That isn’t a dimensional effect. That is a god being shut out because they don’t have permission to operate in a space dedicated entirely to a single deity.”

“Yep. I don’t normally tell people about it, but I don’t want you and your people getting thrown off by it in the middle of a messenger attack. You can take your people into Emir Bahadir’s cloud building if you like. He’ll be making a bunker as well, and it will be gold rank.”

“What you have just told me raises many questions.”

Jason laughed.

“Yeah, it does. And I’m not going to answer any of them.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t have to. I don’t have to do any of this. I could have kept to myself and not gotten involved. But I didn’t. I stepped up because people needed help, even when it meant my secrets poking out of the shadows. You’ll have to forgive me if getting suspicion instead of gratitude for my trouble is starting to make me cranky.”

He walked over to her and reached for the plate, but she moved it out of his reach.

“I’ll eat it,” she said. Good to her word, she picked up one of the triangular cut halves and bit off a corner, her eyes lighting up.

“This is good!”

“You don’t have to sound *that* surprised,” he grumbled.