

Chapter 666

What the Swarm Came to Cure

Jason stood in an empty room, looking through a window wall down at the evacuee camp. It was far more than just the few dozen people from the town Jason and his team had gone to, as towns across the southern region likewise had adventurers investigating. It had started with seven teams and expanded once the truth was discovered.

Through Shade's eavesdropping, Jason was keeping an ear out for how things were going. Jason and his team had encountered one of the worst-gone towns, almost entirely taken over. Some were only in the early stages and had been saved by adventurers who drove off or killed the messengers in them. Unfortunately, it was not all good news.

"Of the seven teams initially deployed, two of them lost members in the process of killing or driving off the messengers they found," Shade reported. "In both cases, it was in larger towns than we were sent to, where multiple messengers were present and the teams did not have a gold ranker with them. Also, one team was lost entirely. Their deaths have been confirmed using their tracking stones."

Each Adventure Society branch maintained tracking stones connected to the adventurers operating in that area. One of the first things Humphrey had done on the team's arrival had been to visit the Adventure Society and notify them that the team would be operating in the area so that local tracking stones could be produced. This was based on soul imprints taken by the Magic Society.

As souls shifted over time, the imprints required refreshing, especially after rank-ups. This was why Farrah had extra problems when identifying herself on her return. Also, other changes in the soul could invalidate an imprint, which was very much the case for Jason. The solution was to obtain a personal crest, which was only possible while at iron rank. It was common amongst nobility and provided a fixed marker for soul imprinting. The Adventure Society had simply copied Jason's imprint when creating one for his John Miller alias.

"If someone was able to take out an entire adventuring team," Jason said, "are they thinking that location is the central hub for worm production?"

"There has been speculation, but I don't have access to the full information," Shade said. "I am only going by what the Adventure Society officials here in the camp have been discussing. I do know that the location in question was one of the larger towns."

"So there might have been a whole messenger contingent there. There certainly had to be a gold-rank messenger."

“From early reports, Mr Asano, there is a particular messenger tactic that the team will need to be wary of.”

“Oh?”

“Messenger abilities vary quite a lot, but many seem to be able to isolate themselves and an enemy such that neither can leave until the other is dead.”

“Allowing them to take out critical enemies,” Jason said. “Healers, glass cannons and the like. Any restrictions, or can they just go in and pluck people out of our formation?”

“It seems to require a certain level of physical isolation. So long as you keep the core members together, it is likely that they will be stuck targeting your more mobile members.”

“That’s acceptable,” Jason said. “Rufus, Humphrey, Sophie and I can all handle a one-on-one. Lindy, in a pinch, although best if we can avoid it. If we keep her, Clive and Neil together, we should be alright.”

“From what I can tell, it is a category of ability the messengers possess, not a specific power. Each messenger who possesses such a power will have their own variant, so there is no predicting exactly how that power will work. I think it is inevitable that you will encounter such a power, Mr Asano, but there is no telling what the exact effects will be.”

“You picked up all this from hearing about just a few encounters?”

“These powers are responsible for the two deaths in the teams that lost members but weren’t wiped out,” Shade explained. “It has been a topic of some discussion, and this is far from the first time that the locals have clashed with the messengers.”

“I see.”

Jason continued to watch the camp’s activity. There was an arrival area where portals or flying vehicles brought in survivors from the towns and villages. They were brought into the cloud palace where Jason had set up screening and treatment rooms. Jason couldn’t see this process through the window, but could observe anything happening in cloud palace, should he desire.

The screening rooms were a redundancy measure, as sufficiently close observation should allow worm hosts to be picked out from their auras. Jason fully agreed with the measure anyway, because of the specialty worms. They had yet to be implanted in the adventurer prisoners Jason’s team had found, but there was no telling what the results would have been. The disappearance of several adventuring teams had been the original prompt for the sweeping investigation into the towns, which left others potentially infested with the special worms.

The precaution was proven valuable as a group of liberated adventurers was brought into the cloud palace. Jason detected an aura mask placed over them, subtle enough that

he might not have even noticed in person. In his cloud palace, however, very little escaped his perception. As they entered, Jason sensed an aura mask similar to the one used by Benella, the elf who had been a spy for the messengers.

At a mental command from Jason, an image of a hallway appeared on the window in front of Jason. It was the group of liberated adventurers being escorted down a hall by a woman in Church of the Healer robes and a man wearing an Adventure Society emblem. They were all bronze rank, according to their auras, and were on their way to the screening rooms.

A second mental command brought up a second live image from within the palace. This one showed Arabelle Remore, in one of the palace's administrative offices. She was standing over a desk with a scowl on her face as she organised procurement lists.

"Arabelle," he said and she looked up, glancing around.

"Jason?"

"You're working with the person running the evacuee operation, right?"

"Yeah," she confirmed, half-groaning. "I'm in charge of making the most of your magic cloud hospital. Right now, supplies are being brought in as quick as people can get their hands on them, which is not the basis for an efficient system. I'm trying to make sure things go where they're needed without too much getting lost in the shuffle."

"Unfortunately, I need to add to your load, I'm sorry."

"Can it wait?"

"I think there is a group of worm-infested adventurers in the building."

"So, 'no' is what you're saying."

"Pretty much. A group of rescued adventurers just came in, but they're all wearing aura masks. The sophisticated kind I've seen the messengers use."

"And you think they've been infected."

"It could be something else. They could be magically disguised messengers for all I know. Unless I poke them hard enough that they notice, I can't tell what they're hiding."

Arabelle left the room, the image on the window moving to track her quick stride.

"We have a team of Adventure Society enforcers on standby for this reason," she said. "They're stationed by the screening rooms."

"I know, but they won't act on my say so."

"I'll get them moving; if something is going to happen, it will be in the screening rooms or on the way. Whoever or whatever we're dealing with, they'll get violent once they realise their disguises won't hold up. Can you use the building to assist?"

“Of course. I just didn’t want to contain them out of nowhere and alarm the people working here.”

“I’m pretty sure they’ll be alarmed anyway.”

"But at least about the right thing. I want people worried about intruders, not the building randomly eating rescued adventurers."

"That's not my responsibility. Once we've contained these adventurers, I want you to meet Hana Shavar, the woman in charge. I don't have time to be your mouthpiece all day."

“Yes ma’am.”

Five elite worm hosts were moving down a hall, in a building with white walls that looked like smooth tiles but were actually absorbent cloud-substance. The hosts communicated silently, much like Jason’s voice chat, wary of their situation. The facility all the rescuees were being taken into was beyond expectations, preventing their magical senses from moving beyond what they could see.

Unlike slave worms, the elite worms were one worm to the host, and had independent minds. While they were capable of commanding slave worms and communicating with the matriarch, they could operate independently, without control. They were independent minds within the swarm.

They had realised that the messengers had never intended to leave this world to the worms once attackers started descending on the initial breeding sites. As the matriarchs started dying, with minimal reaction from the messengers, the worms realised that their agenda no longer aligned with that of their winged allies.

The elite worms had no recourse but to go along, looking for an opportunity. They at least still possessed the aura masks left on the host bodies by the messengers, meaning that they could look for the chance to slip away. If they could rejoin the other elite worms in the city they could begin to work on redeeming a situation that had turned dire. They had not yet had a chance to quietly escape, with so many eyes on them.

Now they were in this strange building, with walls that could block their senses and soft floors that muffled sound, meaning any corner could have people just around it. At least there were only the two people moving with them, now. Even better, they were the same bronze rank as the aura masks inscribed into the host bodies. With the host bodies enhanced to silver, they could put their escorts down quickly and move on.

From what the worms gathered, one of their escorts was a kind of healer, Gloria. The other, Lomius, had a role that was alien to the worms. He seemed to have been given the task of helping others of his kind organise one another, which was the kind of inefficiency

that only came from creatures with isolated minds. Without the swarm to guide them as a colony, their fractious psyches would quickly fall to confusion and disarray. They even had to designate one another with names, just so they could effectively interrelate. The swarm memory had seen this over and over, with countless worlds and countless species. This was what the swarm came to cure.

If the worms were going to move before they reached their destination, the timing was as good as it was likely to get. The two weaklings with them would offer minimal impediment.

"Where are you taking us?" one of the elite worms asked.

"Just a screening to double-check you don't have any of those foul worms in you," Lomius said. "Frankly, I think it's a redundant time-waster, but does anyone listen to me? No, and now you poor sods are stuck jumping through rings instead of getting cleaned up and fed. You've been through enough already, without any extra poking and prodding."

The elite worm made the host give a friendly smile.

"I don't suppose you could skip it, then? We've already been through so much."

Lomius looked to the healer.

"What do you say, Gloria?"

"No."

"Come on."

"No."

"You know they don't really expect to find anything. Otherwise, they'd have more than just us escorting them."

"Lomius, if we had the people, we would have."

Gloria shook her head firmly.

"My Adventure Society colleague may think that this step is unnecessary," she told the worm hosts, and then her expression softened. "I truly am sorry to stretch things out for you, but when the cost of a mistake is so high, redundancy in safety measures is exactly what you want."

"Oh, come on, Gloria," Lomius said. "Do they look like dead bodies being puppeteered by worms to you?"

"No, Lomius, they don't. Which is why we have a screening process instead of having you and me eyeball it."

Lomius shrugged at the worms.

"Sorry, but you heard the lady. Rules are rules."

Without warning, the smiling worm shot into motion. A hand was flung at Lomius, drill-bit-like spikes emerging from its fingers like claws. A wall of cloud stuff started coalescing between the host and the elf, but was not enough to stop the attack. It did slow it down, at least, meaning that only the finger spikes were buried in Lomius' head. The silver-rank strength of the host would have otherwise buried its entire hand into the bronze ranker's head, leaving him very dead instead of just injured.

Another worm host went for Gloria, but another cloudy barrier gave her time to toss up a magical shield. The single strike was enough to break it, but there was no follow-up. The air around the worm hosts had rapidly grown opaque, condensing into thick cloud-substance. Like a mix of marshmallow and concrete, it left the worm hosts stuck, only the two arms that had made attacks visible. They jutted comically from the cloud-stuff, thrashing impotently.

Gloria only stared for a moment before turning to Lomius on the ground. She threw out a fast healing spell and started assessing his injuries. He was conscious but incoherent, having had several three-inch spikes puncture his head. Bronze rankers usually still had brains as a massive vulnerability, especially non-adventurers.

Another glance at the now-blocked hallway told Gloria that the adventurers were not likely to get free. She examined Lomius and realised he had dangerous puncture wounds to the brain that her quick heal hadn't come close to fixing. She assessed that immediate treatment was more important than evacuating him from danger and potentially exacerbating the wounds, so she went to work on a more powerful, ritual-assisted healing ability.

Gloria was still working on the ritual when the Adventure Society enforcers arrived, only moments after the attack. The team leader directed her people to protect Gloria, but wasn't sure what to make of the white wall with two arms sticking out. They had spike-claws jutting from the fingertip and were jerking helplessly.

"What do we do with this?"

Chapter 667

A Mortal Perspective

From his room overlooking the camp, Jason watched a combination of Adventure Society enforcers and Magic Society functionaries take away five cylinders on a floating platform. Each cylinder was a stasis pod, containing a worm host that could be vaguely made out through the blue liquid in the pod.

Someone appeared in the room and joined Jason in staring out the window. It wore brown robes and sported a neat grey beard, appearing as a handsomely middle-aged man. Jason knew that it was neither middle-aged nor a man, and didn't react to its arrival. It was only able to appear there because Jason had withdrawn his spirit domain from the bulk of his cloud construct.

"Just because I happen to have left the door open," Jason said, "that doesn't mean I want just anyone wandering in."

"Thank you for giving my people access to these facilities. It has given us the most precious resource when it comes to healing: time."

"You don't need to thank me for basic decency. If you can help, you help. That's obvious. Besides, I'd rather knock up a quickie hospital and help people than carve up people I was too late to save."

"You've had a grim day."

"Lots of people have, but that's adventuring. We meet a lot of people on the worst days of their lives and hope to make them a little less awful. Didn't do so well today."

"Not every adventurer sees their role in that light."

"Enough do. I know a lot of us get changed by the money, the power, the influence. I certainly was; just ask your boy Dominion. But when the time to step up comes, most adventurers put all that aside. Is there a lot of ambition wrapped up in that? Sure. But they answer the call; the monster surge proved that. There's a lot of hope to be found there."

Healer smiled.

"I am glad that you can find optimism on such days as these. I wondered if there was any left in you when you first came back to this world."

"Is that what you're here for? To cheer me up? I don't think providing a few amenities for the camp here warrants the personal thank you."

"You are in a strange position, Jason. May I call you Jason?"

"Since when does your lot ask permission for anything?"

His laughter was warm and comforting, like a roaring fire in a snow chalet.

"I suppose we don't. Not with mortals, but you don't fall neatly into that box. You are certainly and most enthusiastically mortal, yet you have a foot firmly planted in our realm."

He glanced sideways at Jason.

"Thank you for opening your space to my people. Domains are tricky things, and I can easily see how you might be reluctant to withdraw it."

"Making your people come in and deal with the presence of a spirit domain would only cause problems. It would promote distrust and soak up valuable time while I convince your people to use the building. Seems obvious to take a step back."

"Even so, it is not easy to forsake control, even for a short while. *My boy Dominion* does not approve."

"I don't approve of him either, so fair enough. If you really are grateful, though, I don't suppose you'd be open to a few questions?"

"I can give you *some* answers, but the areas I can speak on are limited by my role. I am not Knowledge. Also, will you trust anything a god has to say?"

"You may not be a bloke, and you may not have a heart, but you seem like a bloke with his heart in the right place. And as for a topic, surely a god can talk about god stuff."

"Yes, but my advice is to concentrate on mortal affairs. The rest will come to you naturally as the incongruity in power between your aspects of self grow smaller."

"Oh, I'd be more than happy to wait until I naturally get to cosmic affairs, but you may have noticed that they're not waiting for me. I've got a great astral being with a personal grudge. I've got gods paying way too close attention – no offence - and I had to start re-writing reality to save the world. Twice. And I cannot understate the degree to which I do not know what I'm doing with that, and I've still got a dimensional bridge to finish. For which I need to go poking around a messenger invasion, which is pretty tame by comparison. And yeah, the messengers aren't mine to deal with, but then there's the whole bit about me being an astral king. Even if I'm willing to put that aside, I don't think they will."

"Then use it; they will respect that status. It won't stop them from trying to kill you, but there can be advantages to being a respected enemy."

"What happened to focusing on mortal affairs?"

"The messengers are mortal. More or less. But I cannot give you more advice on that than I have. I don't want War complaining to me about encroachment."

"How does that work, exactly? What happened with Purity? Why didn't your lot tell anyone?"

“It is not for the rest of us to reveal the deceptions of the god Deception, or unveil the disguises of the God disguise.”

“Tell that to generations of people who were worshipping the wrong god.”

“We did. To gods, the limitations of mortals seem strange. They seem like nothing to us, often meaningless or even contradictory. We, in turn, have limitations that make no sense to mortals, yet to us are as binding as the inevitability of death is to them.”

“You might be talking to the wrong guy about the inevitability of death.”

“As I said, Jason, you are in a strange position. Your nature is liminal, which makes it hard to know how to deal with you.”

“Isn’t there a god of Truth who could have told everyone about Purity?”

“It is far from that simple. Fire and water may seem like oppositional forces at a glance, but in reality, their interactions are complex and not always obvious. In the same way, Truth and deception are not simple antagonists. And even if they were, would you, of all people want them playing out their conflict in the mortal realm?”

“Isn’t that exactly what Disguise did by taking over the Purity church? That’s a lot of mortals being played with like pieces in a game.”

“And if gods were constantly making proxy war of the physical realm, then all mortals would be but pawns, moving back and forth. We gods choose our moments and take our turns, by our own measure.”

“And Truth didn’t get a go in however long since the rest of you ganked Purity?”

“We did nothing to Purity. Most mortals believe that we did, but no. He sanctioned himself.”

“And what is sanctioning, exactly? I’ve been wondering about this for a while.”

“Sanctioning is an extreme change in the nature of a transcendent being, through a comprehensive shift in their authority.”

“Just to be clear, when you say ‘authority,’ you’re talking about the power to fundamentally reconfigure reality and unreality both, creating or recreating elements of cosmos, be it part of a physical universe or the deep astral, right? Or is it more of a ‘permit to host a charity sausage sizzle’ kind of authority?”

“The first one.”

“I figured, but thought it was worth making sure. I’d feel like an idiot if I got it in my head that the old Builder was banished to the depths of the astral when he was outside a hardware store, fundraising for the local girl’s cricket team.”

Healer turned to look at Jason, who looked back.

“What?” Jason asked.

"You are an odd person."

"I'm not that odd. You just need to talk to more mortals."

"That is not so easy. The direct attention of a deity can be hard to withstand. We once gave you that attention, to harden your soul for the challenges to come. There is a reason our appearances in the worship squares are brief and focused on crowds. Unless a mortal is within my spirit domain, or part of my clergy and inured to my attention, even speaking to a projection like this for too long is harmful."

"Should I be worried? We've been here for a while. I feel fine, but are you pulling a spiritual silent-but-deadly on me?"

"As I have said before, you are unusual. Not many mortals have a nascent universe inside them."

"Mum always told me I was special. That's not true. She said my brother was special. Hey, did you change the subject? We were talking about sanctioning, and suddenly you're bringing up my mum."

Healer raised an eyebrow but Jason shamelessly ignored him.

"You were saying something about sanctioning being a shift in authority."

"Yes. A transcendent entity is, by nature, either largely or entirely comprised of authority. Very little of that authority is boundless, however, and most of it has specific affinities. This is how gods come to have areas of influence."

"So, you're pretty much a sentient bundle of authority with a healing affinity?"

"Putting it that way is rather rude, but yes. To the degree that a mortal mind can comprehend the nuances, that is somewhat accurate."

"And sanctioning is changing the affinity of someone's authority?"

"Yes. As the name 'sanctioning' implies, this is normally a punitive act, imposed by other transcendent entities. You know of the new Builder. The previous Builder had its authority forcibly transmuted until it could no longer serve as the Builder."

"So, the old Builder is out there somewhere."

"Yes, although I shall speak no further on that. It is not for me to tell or for you to hear. Yet. The higher-order secrets will come to you as you progress as an astral king."

"And you said that you and the other gods *didn't* do that to Purity?"

"No. Gods can alter their own nature, but it is hard to do so without encroaching on other gods. Purity did it by not changing the affinity of his authority but by expending it."

"He used up all his power?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I do not know his reasons. As a god, I am content, but I know that others are unsatisfied with their lot. Purity took all his power, transmuted all that he was, and channelled it into an act of creation."

"Creation? You're saying that the god of Purity made something so hardcore he had to top himself to get it done?"

"Yes."

"What could possibly require a god killing themselves to make?"

"Something that would inspire the messengers to invade a world."

Jason's eyes went wide.

"Someone told me that the messengers were here looking for something. Something that can purge the monster core effects out of someone's soul. You're telling me that it's some kind of artefact that a god killed himself to make?"

"That's not strictly accurate, but is broadly correct, yes."

"So, to sum up, the god of Purity got ennui and committed suicide by MacGuffin."

"That is not how I would describe it, but I can see how that could be seen as the case. From a very specific perspective."

"You know, I was wondering if my friend was overstating what a big deal this monster core purification thing is."

"He was not."

"Yeah, I'm getting that."

"Into whose hands this object falls is important, yes."

"Are you asking me to go look for the thing? Is that why you're here?"

"No. You have no place amongst the forces that will clash over this."

"Diamond rankers."

"Yes. You can participate in the search, should you desire, but once it is found, run far and fast. I would advise staying out of the chase altogether."

"Do you know where this divine relic is?"

"Yes."

"Are you going to tell anyone?"

"No. After reluctantly going along with Deception and Disguise, the gods have unilaterally decreed that none of us shall interfere with the search for the artefact Purity left behind, or the fight that takes place over it. We shall leave its fate to mortals to determine for themselves."

"Even though it's some kind of divine relic?"

“If a new Purity rises, they may intervene. It is unlikely one will before the issue is settled, however.”

“If you’re not here to get me to involve myself, why are you here?”

“To express my gratitude, as I said. I also have something for you. Consider it both a thank you for your accommodations to my people today, as well as a welcoming gift for your first step into the immortal realm, as tentative as that step is.”

He held out a fist-sized orb, clear but filled with sparks of blue, silver and gold. The moment Jason took it, the god was gone.

Item: [Genesis Command: Life] (transcendent rank, legendary)

The authority to create a life. (consumable, magic core).

- Effect: Give true life to an astral construct created from a dimensional space. The construct becomes a true astral entity, bound to the dimensional space.
- Uses remaining: 1/1

“Holy, crap guy,” Jason muttered. “I think you’re overpaying just to rent out some space.”

Chapter 668

Mr Asano Will See You Now

Jason looked at the orb in his hand, given to him by the Healer. He wasn't certain exactly what it would do, but with the power of his soul space, he was certain he could figure it out. He was tempted to do so immediately, but instead, put it into his inventory. There would be time later, and he couldn't help but feel there was another shoe left to drop with the messengers.

Rufus had posited that the messengers might strike the teams investigating the worm-infested towns. Jason wanted to be able to portal in and rejoin the team in an instant if that happened, but his instincts told him it wouldn't. It could just be his imagination, but he felt an uncomfortable affinity with the messengers, and he couldn't shake the idea that they would come for the city.

If and when the messengers made a move on the city there was only so much Jason could do. Compared to the city's defence infrastructure, one cloud palace would not make a big impact. He certainly couldn't compare to the high-ranking defenders, but he was prepared to make the most of what he could offer. Shade bodies were already placed throughout and around the city.

For the moment, he stayed where he was, looking out over the evacuee camp. He could sense Arabelle moving through the administrative area of the cloud hospital, alongside another gold ranker. It wasn't someone Jason knew, but had sensed roaming around the hospital. They were heading for Jason's location and would shortly arrive. Jason weighed his options for a moment between politeness and being needlessly dramatic before deciding to be true to himself.

"Shade?"

"Yes, Mr Asano?" Shade asked, emerging from Jason's shadow.

"Please show the ladies in when they arrive."

Shade's silhouette form did not have a face with which to give Jason a flat look, yet somehow his pause managed to convey the feeling of one.

"Must we, Mr Asano?"

"What?" Jason asked innocently.

"I know that tone, Mr Asano, and I know what you want."

"That saves time, then."

"I'd rather not."

"It's kind of your job."

“Mr Asano, it’s a terrible movie.”

“I know it’s a terrible movie.”

“And a worse book.”

“It’s a much worse book, yes.”

“I’m not doing it. If you wanted to do this, you should have chosen Christian Grey as your alias.”

“Shade, you understood the job when you became my familiar.”

“Mr Asano, I don’t understand the job *now*.”

“Just get out there; they’re about to arrive.”

Shade looked Jason’s outfit up and down. He had changed into the usual floral shirt, shorts and sandals combination.

“Will the high-priestess be meeting Mr Asano or Mr Miller? And what will he be wearing?”

“Good question,” Jason said, and removed the coins that disguised his eyes. “Asano, I think. I don’t think lies will help smooth out my relations with the lady.”

Jason was shrouded in mist, that faded to show him wearing a neat grey suit.

“Better?”

“Much. You realise that this world has barely started recording theatrical productions for public viewing. They won’t understand the reference to a movie poster from another universe.”

“They never do, Shade.”

“Then why do you insist on doing this?”

“Because it’s fun.”

“Is that entirely appropriate today, Mr Asano? Not long ago we were standing in a town filled with the dead.”

“It’s not appropriate, but I’m going to do it anyway. I’ve tried brooding on the dark days.”

“Quite extensively, as I recall.”

“It didn’t make me feel better; I just spiralled. You know that better than anyone. So, I’m going to remind myself that while life can be a crap sack of death and misery sometimes, I don’t have to let those times define my life. I tried that and it sucked.”

“Very well,” Shade acceded. His voice dripped so heavily disapproval, despite its formality, that Jason was inclined to ban Shade from watching British television.

“When we go back to Earth, I hope your niece is in need of a familiar,” Shade muttered as he disappeared into Jason’s shadow.

“What was that?” Jason asked.

“I have no idea what you are talking about, Mr Asano.”

Hana Shavar was the High-Priestess of the Church of the Healer for the City of Yaresh. When people had started arriving, having been rescued from towns and villages across the southern region, she personally took charge. Scrambling for resources was difficult as they were already being sent off as fast as they could be, to supply the fight with the messengers.

Tapping into the local adventurer resources was a typical approach in such circumstances, although the building from which the evacuee camp was run left her uneasy. On the surface, it was perfect, with a slew of amenities that were a boon to her work, but she could not shake a nebulous suspicion about it.

Something about the building tickled Hana's senses. That there was an aura, heavily tamped-down, was normal for a soul-bound item like a cloud flask. The aura itself even felt protective and benevolent, but something told her that something else lay dormant, like a sleeping dragon.

Arabelle Remore had been a useful asset, both in making the most of the building and assuaging Hana's unease. As a follower of the Healer, Remore's mental health specialty was not as immediately useful as others might have been, but would be critical in the days to come.

Healing magic would swiftly bring the survivors of the towns and villages to full physical health, but what they had been through would take a much longer recovery. There was no healing spell for the memory of everyone you know being killed and their bodies paraded around in a mockery of life.

Even so, Remore did not entirely settle Hana's concerns. While she had never been outright evasion with Hana's questions about the building and its owner, Hana got a definite sense that important things were going unsaid. For this reason, Hana wanted to meet the owner of the building, so when Remore asked if she would, she immediately agreed. Although she was busy, the chance to alleviate her concerns was worth a little time.

Hana was dealing with a few last issues around the infested adventurers that had been caught before leaving when she sensed the presence of her god. Where she couldn't be certain, but he was definitely projecting himself somewhere in the building. With all the work they had to do it was welcome, although she could not help but feel disappointed that he hadn't appeared before her.

One of the building's amenities was a communication system that allowed Hana to see and speak with her key subordinates in the building, but checking around, she could not find where the god had shown himself. That was when she discovered that the others hadn't felt his presence, only Hana herself.

Remore took Hana to the top floor of the building, which had the most space currently unused. It was tagged for the kind of long-term treatment that Remore and others like her would need to conduct, once things slowed down enough to make that possible. They arrived at a door with a shadow creature standing outside it. Most shadow entities blurred into the gloom around them, but this one was neat and clearly defined, looking almost officious despite being little more than a silhouette.

"High Priestess Shavar, Mrs Remore," it greeted them in a male voice with formal intonation.

"Shade," Remore said. "Why are playing doorman? Is something the matter?"

"Yes, Mrs Remore," the shadow said, somehow managing to sound both extremely polite and extremely disgruntled at the same time.

"What happened?" Remore asked.

"The usual," the shadow said.

"Ah. Would I even understand if I asked?"

"No, Mrs Remore. It should not be too onerous, but I cannot speak to the behaviour of Mr Asano."

Hana had seen nothing but professionalism from Arabelle Remore, so was surprised to see her let out a long-suffering sigh.

"Alright," Arabelle said. "Let's get it over with."

"Very well," Shade said. The shadow creature was not easy to read, yet Hana had the sense he was steeling himself with a rigid pause.

"Mr Asano will see you now."

Hana couldn't be certain that she didn't imagine the very slight shudder that seemed to pass over the shadow creature as he spoke and the door opened. The first thing she noticed was the lingering presence of her god; this was the room in which he had appeared.

Inside, the room was empty save for a man standing with his back to the door, hands in pockets as he stared out the window wall. The window itself was tinted, leaving the camp outside and the sky beyond it pale and washed of colour. After a moment, the man turned, giving her the same assessing look she gave him.

Startlingly, his aura was a closed book, despite being only silver rank. Hana's senses were sharp, even for a gold ranker, but all she got from him was the same muted aura she sensed from the building itself. If there was any difference it was that her sense of something dormant and dangerous lying within that aura only grew stronger. If she wanted any more than that, she would have to force her senses onto him, crashing through the boundaries of politeness.

That left his appearance by which to judge him. Asano's expression was that of faint amusement, as if thinking of a joke that only he understood. From the exchange with the shadow creature, she imagined that to be the case, although whether the joke was at her expense she could not tell. From Arabelle's reaction, she guessed it was a self-indulgence of the man himself.

Sharp features were softened by a neatly-trimmed beard, with glossy black hair the standout feature. He had the usual polished symmetry of silver rank but was not stand-out handsome. She guessed that his face had been a little too angular before the polishing effects of ranking up. His suit was neat-casual in the Rimaros-style, expensive without the need to flaunt it, which meant *really* expensive. He wore it well enough, but something told her it was a costume.

Asano's eyes were flagrantly magical, but what drew her attention were his scars. Small marks stood out, bisecting one eyebrow and gouging a thin, hairless mark in his beard. A more substantial mark was on his throat, plainly visible with the open collar of his shirt.

Finally, she turned to the eyes, blue and orange with dark sclera. They gave the sense of distant power, off in a void, and Hana immediately concluded that this was the most honest thing in his appearance.

Looking into his eyes, something finally clicked about the building. It was hard to notice, barely registering on her magical senses, but something was feeding power to the building from somewhere. If she hadn't been intimately familiar with the process, as a channel for divine power, she wouldn't have recognised it at all.

This time she did push her senses beyond the limits of propriety, exploring the link between the man and the building. She traced the link back to some kind of power inside him that she didn't recognise, her aura recoiling at the touch of it. He showed amusement rather than offence.

"Rude," he said, the edges of his mouth curling in a slight smile. "Your aura is strong for your rank."

Despite outranking him, his words felt patronising after what she'd just felt. Even without the power that tossed her back, the aura she had dug through to find it had been impossibly potent for a silver ranker.

"Who are you?" she asked bluntly. After what she'd just done with her aura, there was little point in the pretence of manners.

"Jason Asano."

She frowned.

"*What* are you?"

"Team chef."

"Liar."

"Frequently. Drink?"

A drinks cabinet made of clouds rose from the floor. A bench slid out of it with three glasses and Asano started mixing drinks, not waiting for a response.

"I have concerns about this building," Hana said. "And about you."

"And I have concerns about you," he said, not looking up from his task. "Arabelle, your friend's manners leave something to be desired."

"You're right," Hana acknowledged. "But while you're standing there, playing games, people with intense trauma are being brought in here. I need to know that you are genuinely trying to help and not setting us up for something that will only make things worse."

"I'm not sure it can get much worse for these people," Jason said. "If I have some political agenda, what do they care? And if I was in league with the messengers, enacting some wildly convoluted scheme, do you think some lady interrogating me in my own house will bring it all down?"

There was flinty rebuke in his final words, but when he looked up from the drinks, there was still nothing but faint amusement on his face. The beverages in front of him were in wide, short glasses, clear to show off colourful layers of liquor. He took one of the glasses from the bench and the other two floated off as the cabinet descended into the floor. Hana realised that he was levitating the glasses with his aura. Like a messenger.

"There are too many questions about you to trust," she said, leaving the glass floating in front of her. "You should be taking things seriously on a day like today."

Jason sipped at his drink as Arabelle grabbed hers and took a heavy gulp, shaking her head at the both of them.

"I disagree," Jason said. "I've seen enough days like today, and I've taken them very seriously. I'm not going to go roaming past the survivors, whistling a jaunty tune, but I

won't wear a dark cloud over my head like that will somehow make things better, either. As for trust, that's on you."

"I understand that you have seen a lot of death today."

"That's right."

"You seem very frivolous for someone encountering such a thing."

"I do, don't I?"

"Do you think that those deaths mean nothing?"

"That would make me a monster."

"Which is exactly why I asked."

"The deaths matter. They all matter."

"Then how is it that you seem so unaffected?"

"Practise."

"How can you use your aura like a messenger?"

"Also practise."

"Why was my god here?" Hana asked, which drew a raised-eyebrows expression from Arabelle.

"Fashion advice," Asano said. "He's looking to switch the church robes from brown to a pale blue. I'm trying to talk him into a floral print, but he's being reluctant."

"You're veering in the direction of blasphemy."

"I'm Jason Asano, pleased to meet you. That's twice I've introduced myself, by the way."

Hana frowned.

"Hana Shavar. High Priestess of the Church of the Healer, Yaresh."

Instead of the slight, rather smug smiles he had shown thus far, his sudden and genuine-seeming smile lit up his face.

"Have a drink, Priestess. This might be your camp, but this is my house and you're a guest. A rude one, as we've already established."

Cloud furniture rose from the floor, a seat behind Jason and a couch behind Hana and Arabelle. Jason and Arabelle sat, then Hana took the still-floating glass and sat as well, glowering at Jason.

She looked at the glass in her hand. Did it have some undetectable poison whose fumes were affecting her? She barely recognised her own behaviour, realising that this man and his strange building unsettled her much more than she had originally realised. Was it the strange power inside him, or some childish jealousy over her god appearing in front of him and not her? That was foolish, as her god appeared to her frequently. Was it

as simple as a personality clash? There was just something about the man that made her want to punch him in his smug face, but she was far better than that. Scolding herself, she schooled her emotions.

“I apologise, Mr Asano. You have been generous, and I have been discourteous.”

“It’s a rough day, Priestess; I won’t begrudge you a little stress. And call me Jason.”

“My behaviour notwithstanding, I have a responsibility to this city and the people we are attempting to help here. I cannot allow any potential dangers, and this building troubles me. Its owner troubles me more. I’ve seen cloud palaces before – there is one nearby for direct comparison – but this one is different. I don’t know what power you are using to feed it, or how, but it’s close enough to a divine connection that I keep coming back to my original questions: who and what are you?”

Asano crossed his legs and leaned back in his chair, relaxed. He took a sip of his drink.

“To sum up, Priestess, you want me to tell you all my secrets before I’m qualified for the privilege of lending you what I’m confident you’ve already found to be an exceptionally useful building.”

“Yes. Mr Asano, what are your thoughts on mysterious powers that you don’t understand, with motives you don’t know?”

“I’m against them, as a rule. But they try to kill me on a regular basis, so I’m biased. But I’ve learned that sometimes you have to suck it up and do the job in front of you.”

“And how has that worked out for you?”

“Very mixed,” he said, frustration poking through his façade as he turned to Arabelle. “Is this what I’m like? Marching into places to make rude and outrageous demands?”

“Yes,” Arabelle said absently, peering into her glass with a sceptical expression. “How is this so sweet? It’s like syrup.”

“I think I’m starting to see why people don’t like me,” Jason said, then turned his attention back to Hana.

“If you don’t trust this building, don’t use it.”

“That would make the camp activities far less efficient,” she said. “Especially given that we are already using it quite heavily.”

“Then you have a choice. Give it up and make things worse, or keep using it and live with the mystery. I’ll leave the decision up to you.”

Jason and his chair both descended into the floor, vanishing. Arabelle immediately turned to Hana.

“If I might ask, High Priestess, are you alright? I’ve been watching you act with decorum all day, in the most hectic of circumstances. I expected Jason to be... something, and what he was fit, but you surprised me.”

Hana looked into the glass in her hands, still untouched. Her expression reflected her thoughts, uncertain and troubled.

“I’m sorry, Priestess Remore. I’m not sure exactly what has gotten into me. I think it is an accumulation of things. Also, I don’t think I’ve ever had someone infuriate me so quickly. The arrogance and the smugness of him. What we’re doing here is important and he treats it like a joke. That is not an excuse for my behaviour, I know. Do you think he will withdraw his use of this cloud building?”

“Oh, don’t worry about annoying Jason. Being rude will get you on his good side faster than being polite, if anything. I’m more worried about what’s going on with you. When was the last time you slept?”

“I don’t know. Three, four days? We assaulted the messenger strongholds in sequence. Wanted them on the back foot in case the problems to the south were part of some plan of theirs. I was barely back in the city when the call for the camp came in. But again, that’s a reason, not an excuse.”

“You need to rest.”

“There’s too much work.”

“And there are people to do it, at least long enough for you to sleep. I’m not asking, High Priestess. This is an order from your mental care specialist.”

Hana nodded, still staring into the colourful liquid in her glass. She closed her eyes as she lifted it to her lips to take a sip. As the thick sweetness of the liquor spread over her tongue, her eyes shot open.

“This is amazing!”

Chapter 669

Hot Chocolate

Jes Fin Kaal was not prone to nervousness. As a messenger, confidence was ingrained. More than that, she was a Voice of the Will; a representative of her people's most powerful beings. But as much as she might have tried to bury the memory, she remembered the sense of inferiority that had defined the final moments of Pei Vas Kartha as she died at Jason Asano's hands.

While being a Voice of the Will was an unquestionably powerful position, there was no escaping the fact that it was a state of permanent subordination. Even if that was to an astral king, serving anyone did not come naturally to messengers. While ordinary messengers might obey her now, each one of them was looking towards the day when they surpassed her, reaching the pinnacle of their kind. That only a minuscule few would ever reach those heights meant little, so long as the potential was still there. For all the power that a Voice commanded, they did not have that potential. Their power ultimately came from another.

The messengers had never been able to determine what set the limits to their individual power. They did not even learn those limits until they hit them. For those who discovered themselves unable to surpass silver rank, there were only two options. One was to accept their status as the least of their kind, and live with being superior to everything that wasn't a messenger. The other was to seek out an astral king that would have them, allowing them to artificially surpass their limits.

While other messengers might serve an astral king, and be subject to their power, they could always escape it if they themselves grew powerful enough. For a Voice of the Will, there was no going back. Silver and even gold-ranked messengers might show deference to a Voice of the Will, those who reached diamond looked at them with disdain. Diamond was the hard limit for voices, while messengers who reached that point on their own had the potential to become astral kings, however unlikely that was. For that reason, diamond rank messengers looked down even on voices that had reached the same rank.

Jes Fin Kaal was a gold-rank voice, and while she had claimed command of the messenger forces in the region, there was a diamond ranker amongst them who could take that right from her whenever he liked. That he had chosen not to was typical of diamond-rank messengers. While they might be forced to capitulate to the agendas of astral kings, their obsession was transcending mortality to become one themselves.

Unsurprisingly, the diamond ranker, Mah Go Schaat had claimed the largest and tallest building in the stronghold as his own. Jes flew up and hovered around the domed pinnacle. She waited to be acknowledged, one minute turning into ten and minutes becoming an hour. Everyone in the stronghold could look up and see her being left outside, waiting on an audience.

Jes did not mind, seeing it both as a childish power play and a chance to rest her mind in meditation. Between the attacks on the messenger strongholds, organising the upcoming attack and reacting to the adventurers hitting the worm nests, she could use the rest. As for the idea of being shamed in front of the entire stronghold, she did not care what the people below or the one she was waiting on thought of her. She neither needed their praise nor feared their scorn.

Finally, a panel in the dome slid open to allow her entry. Inside was a library with bookshelves and tables covered in tomes. Freestanding magical writing boards were scrawled with notes and had papers pinned to them, showing scraps of map or magical diagrams.

There was only one chair. It was a massive throne of dark leather in the messenger style, with an hourglass back to allow for wings. Mah Go Schaat was sitting in it, his brown wings with dark yellow speckling spread out behind it. He was a massive figure, even for a messenger, being almost as tall sitting as Jes was when floating upright, just over the floor.

The chair was facing the door, but he did not look up as Jes entered. His gaze was locked onto a many-faceted crystal he was holding in one hand. She waited patiently, just as she had outside. Finally, Mah's eyes shifted from the crystal to her.

"Why do you interrupt my contemplation, Voice?"

"The time approaches to attack the city. We launch our attack in the hours before dawn."

"You would presume to have me move at your word?"

"I am only the voice. The word is that of the astral king."

"Is it? This is your plan, Jes Fin Kaal."

"If you wish to claim my position, you have the power. I can let the astral king know that you will be enacting his agenda."

Mah glowered and Jes did not let her disdain reach her face. Mah was a typical, unthinking thug who believed that being a messenger and being powerful was all he needed to embody their superior ideals. Jes knew that superiority was not just a birthright, and that their actions were needed to maintain it.

Jes knew that it was foolish to prod Mah, yet she could not resist the urge. The more powerful a messenger became, especially one like him, the more they chafed any time they were forced to acknowledge any will but their own. Being a voice, and no longer the instrument of her own will, had given Jes what she believed was a more objective perspective. The myopic power obsession of too many messengers left them with no sense of what truly made their kind great. They had faith just as blind as the fools who worshipped gods.

Mah not only lacked the inclination to administer the messenger strongholds but also the ability, and he knew it. Like Fal Vin Garath, whom Jes would be sending to test Asano, Mah was a brute who saw value in nothing but power. It was only on realising that martial power alone would not allow them to transcend immortality that they started looking further afield. Jes had seen more than one diamond ranker suddenly immerse themselves in study after hitting the barrier that lay between diamond rank and transcendence.

“Very well,” Mah finally said through gritted teeth.

“If I may,” Jes said with deference, knowing when to step back, “I would like to submit a role in the attack for your approval.”

“Speak on it,” Mah ordered.

“The weapon we placed in the city years ago is no longer under containment,” Jes said. “I was going to place someone new to contain the change, but as the timing was right, I decided to exacerbate it instead. Once the weapon awakens, the city will deploy their forces against it, as it is already inside the defences. That is when we will attack weak points in the city infrastructure that we have identified. My hope is that you, as the supreme power in this conflict, will consent to attack a critical node in the infrastructure while the city is occupied with the weapon. From there, if you occupy the city’s sole diamond-rank defender, our forces can rampage.”

“What is your goal?”

“The city has been the feeding point for the forces that have been harassing us. We seek to ruin and sow chaos; to bring the war they have pressed on us to their doorstep. They coddle their weak masses, who will demand their power be used as a shield they can huddle behind, no longer sent to the attack. We can then turn our attention to the Builder's remnant forces, the Ashen and the tainted.”

“Then what solution have you found to the natural array? Have you finally accepted it for the crucible it is?”

“I still oppose a mass attack. There is no telling how many more of our people will suffer the taint.”

“Which is how we cull the weak and inferior. The ones who fall to the taint – as you doubtless would, without the astral king’s power – are not worthy to be counted as messengers.”

“We will let the essence users eliminate the array.”

“How will you manage that?”

“What does it matter, so long as it works?”

Mah’s lip curled in a snarl but he didn’t push.

“Go, then. Send word when the time comes and I may deign to join your attack.”

Jes gave him a short bow.

“My gratitude for your benevolence, Mah Go Schaat.”

The rear wing of the cloud hospital Jason created was the private residence and provided facilities for Jason and his team, still fully within his spirit domain. Jason waited, leaning against a wall with two fruit drinks in large steins, one of which he was sipping from through a metal straw. On the opposite wall, a doorway opened as the cloud door dissolved into nothing, revealing an exhausted-looking Taika.

The big man was stripped down to the waist, his dark, tattooed torso almost large enough to seal the doorway again. Gone was the roundness that he had when they first met, his body instead sporting the sculpted muscle of a professional wrestler.

Jason held out the spare drink, Taika taking it eagerly.

“Thanks, bro,” Taika said as he plucked the straw from his stein, then heavily gulped down half of the drink at a go, juice running down his chin. He let out a breath as he grinned and wiped his chin with the back of his arm. “That’s the stuff.”

“For a guy who’s been meditating,” Jason said, “you look a lot like someone who just finished a session at the gym.”

“Meditation isn’t exactly the same for an essence user as for a lady who buys a lot of crystals at a new age store,” Taika said. “You know that. I’ve seen you doing that Dance of the Sword Fairy technique that Rufus taught you.”

“Yeah,” Jason agreed. The availability of more effective meditation techniques for adventurers was one of the fundamental differences between the essence users of Earth and Pallimustus. As one of the pillars of non-core advancement, such techniques were also the least intuitive to develop. Pallimustus had been refining them for millennia, whereas Earth had almost nothing

Even the US Network only had a few basic techniques, but that had still put them in a globe-dominating position amongst the magical factions. Those techniques had come

from the Network founder when his familiar – who would go on to become Mr North – betrayed him.

As essence users ranked up, their minds changed, becoming capable of more. Meditation techniques need to change accordingly, taking in elements of internal mana manipulation, martial arts katas and plain physical exertion, depending on the nature and purpose of the exercise. Jason relied heavily on different versions of the sword dance meditation Taika had just mentioned.

“Did Humphrey show you something new?” Jason asked. As Humphrey and Taika had similar roles, Humphrey had supplied Taika with more appropriate techniques than Jason or Farrah had to offer him back on Earth. Without anything specialised for him, he had been using the same general techniques Farrah taught all her Network trainees.

“Actually,” Taika said, “I met this bloke when I was coming back into the city from a solo job.”

While Jason had been doing sexy aura training over the past week, Taika had been taking solo contracts, pushing himself to finally cross the line into silver. As a result, his aura was almost trembling with how ready he was to take the final step.

“We got to talking,” Taika continued, “and he ended up showing me this meditation technique that meshes perfectly with my garuda essence. It’s called Golden Wings Transcending the Heavens. Sounds pretty sweet, right?”

“It does. And it looks like it works pretty sweet too, if your aura is anything to go by.”

“Hell yeah, bro. You ready to have me on the team?”

“That, I’m not so sure about,” Jason said.

Taika frowned.

“Are you saying I’m not good enough?”

“No, I’m saying that between you and Rufus joining, there’s too many sexy brown people. I’m worried Belinda will have the team name changed to Hot Chocolate.”

The messenger forces were preparing to leave their strongholds. The attacks from the city had been an impediment, but not a critical one, and the messengers were aching to pay what they thought of as the servant races back in kind.

Not far from one of the marshalling yards, Jes looked at Fal Vin Garath, who still didn’t have a mouth after she had taken it from him. She was somewhat surprised that he had managed to endure, not thinking the brute would tolerate what she had done to him for long. Her ability to affect him in such a way was tied directly to Fal’s acceptance of the authority of the astral king she served. The moment he rejected that authority, his mouth

would have returned. She would have subsequently killed him, but he'd have died with his mouth back.

It was a test in and of itself, as even a moment's disloyalty would have been enough. Yet he stayed true, despite the inherent ambition and demonstrated arrogance of the man. Despite Fal being her least favourite kind of person, Jes was forced to acknowledge at least a modicum of grudging respect.

"We are going to attack the city," she told him. "You've already been given your task. Hunt down Asano and kill him. If you can, all well and good. If not, do your best to withdraw and regroup with our regular forces. Do you understand?"

Fal's blank lower face morphed back into a mouth, yet he silently nodded.

"Good," she told him. "Now that you have a mouth again, do you have any questions?"

"If this man truly is somehow a silver rank astral king, are you certain you want me to kill him?"

"If he is someone that you can kill, Fal Vin Garath, he isn't worth using."

She felt the anger suffuse his aura.

"You don't like it," she said. "You don't like that this man is already on the path that is the goal of every messenger. You don't like that I'm using you as a tool, as if he is more important than you. I am curious if you will let that anger rule you. If you do, you will die. It might be because you fight Asano to the death, or perhaps you will lash out at me and be struck down."

She grinned.

"Prove me wrong," she told him. "Show me that you're more than a mindless thug, and you will find that I can be a valuable ally in your quest for advancement. We did not start off on the best foot, Fal Vin Garath, but do well here and this could go very well for you."

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.