

## 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.”

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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!”