

Chapter 636

Quiet Professionalism

The original design of Jason's cloud constructs allowed two modes. One was overtly made of cloud substance, while the other looked traditionally constructed by the vessel replicating ordinary materials. This could be a false façade or truly mimic the properties, so long as the materials had been fed into the flask.

Over time, the binary nature of the constructs had become more fluid as Jason made many alterations to the cloud flask that produced them. Between deepening his bond to it, filling it with myriad new materials and altering it using authority stolen from the Builder, the cloud flask had undergone extreme changes.

The culmination of this was a third form of cloud construct that used a hybrid of replicated materials and cloud substance in equal measure. The inclusion of House de Varco's modification designs had made it possible, allowing the vessels to use the best of both worlds. Not only could it enjoy the exceptional properties of any materials it reproduced but also the mutable and self-repairing properties of cloud substance.

Belinda ascended stairs that were rigid platforms that seemed like white marble, both to the eye and to the touch. They floated on cloud-stuff that offered just a tiny bit of give, balancing comfort and support. That support modulated itself automatically, whether the person walking it was as heavy as Gary or as light as Belinda. Light was a relative term, however, as high-rankers weighed more than normal people of identical builds. Belinda's small frame looked very light, while her actual weight was more than Taika's had been, pre-essence.

Belinda made her way up the stairs to the top deck, where a cabin door opened at her approach. Jason's master cabin looked different every time she went inside as he frequently shifted it around, and this time it was empty save for Jason himself. He was standing in front of the window, back to the cabin as he looked out at the city in the distance. Dark structures of glass and metal poked through the rainforest canopy in the distance to gleam in the harsh summer sun.

"I have them," Belinda said, moving into the cabin. "They'll stop working if you use your more overt magical abilities, but that shouldn't be an issue for you. Humphrey would have more to worry about in that regard."

"What about using my aura?" Jason asked without turning around. "It's a little more forceful than the norm."

"I've never tested this kind of device with an aura like yours. I'd keep it tamped down, just to be safe. That shouldn't be a problem if you're laying low, right?"

Jason turned around, flashing her a smile.

"Exactly right," he agreed as she handed him a pair of blue coins. "I just put them in place?"

"I like to keep devices like this one simple. It's important to be able to change appearances quickly and easily when you're avoiding pursuit."

"I'm not looking to steal anything," Jason told her, a hint of good-natured scolding in his voice.

"I'm just saying that you should keep your options open."

"Is this what the princess uses to change her appearance?"

"I'm fairly certain she uses some ritual magic designed especially for celestines. Not quite as convenient, and needs regular reapplication, but it will hold up under stress in a way that these won't. But as long as you avoid your big finisher spells or any of your wide-area powers, these should be fine."

"I'm not looking to get in any fights," Jason said.

"You never are," Belinda said.

"You didn't see me back on Earth," he said, then placed the blue coins over his eyes. The coins immediately vanished, revealing not Jason's alien eyes but ordinary dark brown ones, much as they'd been when he was human. "I wasn't mellow the way I am here."

"Are you sure you don't want your eyes to be a piercing, icy blue or something?" Belinda offered. "I can tweak them very easily."

"No thank you," Jason said, prodding around his eyes. The coins had truly disappeared, not just turned invisible.

"They'll reappear if you use too much magic," Belinda said. "Just channel mana into your eyes if you want to take them off."

Using most magic items was a fairly instinctual process of feeding them with mana to form a magical link. Jason did just that with his eyes and they went back to normal as the coins reappeared.

"That will do nicely," he said. "Thank you, Belinda."

The city of Yareh was relatively small in terms of population, having only a few tens of thousands. The design, deeply accommodating the natural environment, led to a small population density, however. Geographically, Yareh had the footprint of a much larger centre.

Humphrey, Clive and Neil had gone ahead to the Yareh Adventure Society branch to gather information. The information they brought back spoke to a situation more complex than originally anticipated, which they gathered everyone together to explain.

Almost every member of the convoy was present in the cloud vessel's briefing room, even the gold rankers, including the less-than-stable Callum Morse. Absent were the Order of Redeeming Light prisoners, all in magical stasis save for Melody, locked in her cabin in the cloud house. Carlos was present but his assistants were not, leaving the two last absentees.

Humphrey, Clive and Neil stood at the front of the briefing room, the others sitting in rows watching them.

"Where's Asano?" Korinne asked from the first row, the team leader sitting alongside the gold rankers.

"Jason and Estella Warnock," Humphrey told her, "have headed for the city, where they will remain for what we estimate to be two weeks. The reason is that for the duration of that time, our teams will be working in close cooperation with other teams in the area. That means avoiding questions about why the cook is killing so many monsters, or why a mysterious figure keeps slaughtering monster packs before we arrive. Until we can operate more independently, Jason will be working in the city."

"Warnock I understand," Korinne said. "Scouting out urban areas is her job. Asano doesn't strike me as much of a spy."

"Jason will surprise you when it comes to blending in with regular folk," Gary said. "When he doesn't have to get involved with kings and gods and high-rank adventurers, he can blend in just fine. Especially for someone from another world. He doesn't run around doing outlandish things around normal people because he doesn't have to."

"Mostly doesn't," Rufus qualified. "Depending on your definition of outlandish."

"He's far more normal around regular people," Gary said. "Remember that village, right after we met him. He was just meeting people and being social. While gathering information, I'll remind you. Completely sensible."

"Are you talking about the village where he was blasted off the side of a mountain by a malfunctioning waterfall before saving the village from a bunch of shabs?" Rufus asked him.

"It's not his fault the waterfall wasn't working properly."

"Standing in front of it when it wasn't working was."

“Jason isn’t going into the city to spy,” Arabelle spoke up, cutting them short. “He presented a new idea for refining his aura control to Lord Pensinata, who approved of his exploration of the concept.”

“What concept?” Korinne asked.

“Integrating aura-echo interrelation with interpersonal magic,” Clive explained.

“What does that mean?” asked Kalif, a member of Korinne’s team. “Interpersonal magic?”

Clive took on an uncomfortable expression.

“Interpersonal magic is known by a wide variety of colloquial terms,” he said. “One of which is carnal magic.”

“Wait,” Kalif said. “We’re going to be working for the next two weeks while Asano is off knocking boots with the cute pink-haired woman?”

“Miss Warnock and Jason will be operating separately,” Humphrey said. “Miss Warnock will fulfil her role as a spy while Jason undertakes his own endeavour.”

“Plus, Stella likes girls,” Sophie added.

“So much for that then, Polix,” Kalif said to another member of his team who had a disappointed expression. “Hold on, if Asano isn’t taking someone with him, how is he going to use rumpy-pumpy magic?”

“Firstly,” Clive said, “please don’t call it that. And secondly, I imagine he’ll seek out volunteers.”

“Meaning he’ll have to pick up women himself?” Kalif asked. “Who’s going to go for that guy? If he had his Rimaros reputation to play off he might get a pity rub, but he’s playing a cook now, right? He’s going to spend the next two weeks going home alone.”

“I completely agree,” Belinda said. “What woman will go for a guy with laid-back charm, absolute confidence, a mysterious dark side and hidden secrets. Plus, he can cook and dance, which are traits that famously repel women.”

“I bet he doesn’t go for those stuffy society dances,” commented Rosa, the scout from Kalif’s team, earning her a glare from Kalif.

“I mean, who cares?” Rosa covered lamely.

“I think that’s quite enough about Jason,” Humphrey said. “We need to focus on our own activities in the coming weeks and potentially months. The conflict with the messengers in this region has proven significantly more complex than anticipated.”

“The Adventure Society more or less told us to shut up and do the contracts we’re told,” Neil said. “They’re on a war footing and are looking for soldiers who will obey, not adventurers causing trouble.”

"Fortunately," Humphrey said, "we were contacted by a priest of the Church of Knowledge. He gave us a much more thorough appraisal of the situation and background to how it reached this point. He also told us that if we can, not to make a fuss and follow the Adventure Society's orders for a couple of weeks, at which point the Church of Knowledge will requisition us for the main conflict. They already know about Jason, so they'll set us up on missions where he can work with us almost openly. They regularly requisition teams, so it won't look too out of place if we've proven ourselves reliable."

"Why would it look outlandish if they just call us up now?"

"Because there are plenty of teams that have already proven themselves and want a place in the big fight," Neil said. "If we come in out of nowhere and take a slot, people will start looking at us closer than we want to be looked at."

"The Church of Knowledge reached out because of Jason's relationship with the goddess," Clive said. "But Jason is also the reason we don't want too many eyes on us."

"Relationship with the goddess," Belinda repeated. "And this guy thinks he'll have trouble picking up women."

"It's not that kind of relationship, Belinda," Clive said. "Also, I'm fairly certain that implying it is counts as blasphemy."

"So?" she shot back. "Gods and their churches never did a damn thing for me."

"You do know that I'm a priest of the Healer, don't you?" Neil asked.

"You've got an imaginary friend; we're all very proud," Belinda told him. "Get on with it."

"The Healer is not imaginary! And you're the one who interrupted in the first place."

"Belinda," Humphrey admonished, his tone making it plain that he was not willing to brook further nonsense. "If silence is as much professionalism as you can muster, then do so. Clive, please explain what is going on."

Clive nodded as Belinda gave Neil a smirk but held her tongue.

"Some of what we're about to tell you is information we had already gathered from various sources," Clive said. "Some of it comes from the priest of Knowledge we just met. As you should all be aware, the Church of Knowledge has been mustering forces in certain areas around the world."

"What most of you won't know," Humphrey followed on, "is the scale and scope of the Church's activities, and how long they've been going on."

"The groundwork for the church's activities," Clive picked up, "turns out to have been going on for decades. Large troupes are being established piecemeal, so as not to attract attention. Monster cores have been used to create expansive forces of essence users,

under the command of more conventionally-trained adventurers. Each and every one, faithful to the Church of Knowledge. Only the god War was aware of the magnitude of Knowledge's plans, and remained silent for reasons unknown, at least to us."

"A number of years ago," Humphrey said, "they started to mobilise and gather at locations around the world, chosen by no means anyone could determine. It took a while to realise what was happening and on what scale, but if you track the activity back to when the forces that Knowledge had built up started moving, it was all on a single day. A day after which the Church of Knowledge apparently no longer cared about being noticed."

"Given that you've made such a point of it," Korinne said, "I assume there is something significant about that day."

"It was the same day Jason Asano first arrived in this world," Clive said. "Knowledge knows more than even the other gods. She knew the messengers were coming, and she knew that Jason would be the one that opened the window through which they would come."

"Are you saying that Asano is responsible for the messenger invasion?"

"No," Humphrey said. "Jason and Farrah were the ones who triggered the monster surge."

"The monster surge that had been artificially delayed for years," Clive added. "The longer it was stalled, the worse the surge that came with it would be when finally unleashed. And the longer the Builder would have to plunder our world. Jason and Farrah put an end to that delay and prevented it from getting worse, but some amount of damage was inevitable. It was a plan that came into effect years before Jason ever encountered magic."

"And the same window used by the Builder," Humphrey said, "allowed what we thought was the Church of Purity to help the messengers in coming to our world. And that is where everyone learned what Knowledge had been preparing for,"

"Where Knowledge had gathered, other forces gathered in reaction," Neil explained. "And in every region where that happened, messengers were summoned. Knowledge has been preparing to defend this world for decades, building the force we would need but have no time to establish once the threat was revealed."

"This brings us to what the priest in Yareash told us," Humphrey said. "A few hours from the city, Knowledge's military force set up a camp. The god of War did the same, and then the messengers came. The government in Yareash, as well as the Adventure Society, were both concerned about each of these developments, and then things got worse."

“There is an extremely rare natural magic event that can happen,” Clive said. “It’s called a natural array. To excessively simplify, it means that, over time, essences, awakening stones and quintessence manifested, undisturbed, in a very specific pattern. The convergent magical energies within that pattern combine to create unconventional effects. The nature of those effects is defined by the size and nature of the pattern, as well as the elements that make it up.”

“Can someone simplify that some more?” Kalif asked.

“It means that sometimes magic stuff happens,” Clive said, exasperated. “If you can’t follow more than that, then I recommend staying quiet and asking your team leader after the briefing.”

“I’m not an idiot,” Kalif said sullenly.

“Then do the smart thing and be quiet,” Clive said, “or we’ll be here all day.”

“I don’t like how you’re speaking to my team member,” Korinne said warningly.

“And I stopped caring what you liked the moment your new team member arrived,”

Clive shot back. “Shut up and listen or get out.”

Humphrey put a hand on Clive’s shoulder.

“Clive—”

“No,” Clive said, shrugging off his hand, and turned on Amos Pensinata. “You were brought on to help Jason, not make things worse. But your baggage...”

He waved a hand at Korinne’s team.

“...has only made things worse. So, fix it or get off this boat and take them with you.”

With that, Clive stormed out, Humphrey wincing as he watched him go.

“What about the briefing?” Neil asked. “Clive was meant to cover the magic stuff.”

“We’ll postpone,” Humphrey said. “We’ve covered what we need for the next couple of weeks, which is that we’ll be given contracts that we should carry out with the kind of quiet professionalism that we have failed to demonstrate today. We can reconvene the briefing once we’re in the city and everyone has cooled down.”

At the back of the briefing room, Zara shrank into her chair, trying to make herself as small as she felt.