

Chapter 706

Original Design Parameters

While Jason's cloud palace was still largely occupied with servicing the displaced population of Yaresh, Jason maintained an area for himself and his companions. Part of it was a living area, with Sophie and Belinda in one room and the boys in a bunk dorm to save space. Sophie's mother, Melody, was in a secure room adjacent to her daughter, while other members of the convoy were stashed elsewhere. Amos Pensinata was staying with his nephew's team in their vehicle, and Rufus' mother, Arabelle, was staying with her old team member, Emir. Emir's cloud palace was being used much like Jason's, and he had even more room that he could put to use.

The open space between the two cloud palaces had been a refugee camp until the battle pounded it into a mud pit, but earth shapers had already established a new series of crude but functional stone buildings. One part of it had been left clear, a flat stone area that served as an arrival destination for portals. The towns to the south were still being cleared of world-taker worms, with the cloud palaces serving as processing centres for surviving townsfolk.

Rain was coming down heavily as a portal opened that did not come from the southern towns but from a city half a continent to the north. Three people stepped through and Jason, inside his cloud palace, immediately sensed their presence. He stepped through a Shade body to shadow jump to them, rising from Travis Noble's shadow like he was riding an elevator.

Travis stumbled back, startled. He was from Earth, a specialist in magical technology. His precise specialisation was large-scale weaponry but, like Clive, he was an enthusiastic researcher whose expertise bled into a variety of adjacent fields.

Farrah laughed as Jason appeared and the rain stopped falling straight down, curving around them as Jason's aura pushed it out of the way. Jason grinned as he clasped Farrah in a hug.

"You paid a gold-ranker to portal you here?"

"The Church of Knowledge did," the third new arrival informed him. It was Gabrielle Pellin, priestess of the Church of Knowledge and Humphrey's ex-girlfriend.

Jason spared Gabrielle a glance as he stepped back from Farrah. He and Gabrielle did not get along very well, which had been a factor in ending her relationship with Humphrey. She was now attached to Farrah and Travis' current project to combine Earth technology with Pallimustus magic to create a new communication network.

“Let’s go inside,” Jason said, nodding in the direction of his cloud palace. “More people are portalling in on the regular, so we should avoid clogging up the arrival site.”

The cloud palace was, at the moment, a blank slab that looked like a Soviet Bloc construction. Compared to the adventurer vehicles around it that were all exotic mobile fortresses, the starkness and size of it stood out. Arrayed in front of its four storeys were stone-shaped buildings that matched the bleakness of the current cloud palace with boxy designs and hard edges. The wide pathways in between were simple, just large flagstones set into the dirt. The value of this was evident as the rain turned that dirt into mud, saving the many people around from needing to trudge through it.

Even with the rain, there was no shortage of people around them as Jason led the trio in the direction of his cloud palace. Some people were ignoring the rain while others hustled to move through it quickly. More than a few had water-repelling umbrellas, much like one Jason used to have. The expensive umbrellas had water slide off smoothly, much as Jason’s aura did. The cheap ones sent water spraying off violently, annoying anyone who lack their own water repulsion. This often included other users of cheap umbrellas, which often didn’t shield from the sides.

They came across a pair of men with cheap umbrellas that had managed to splash each other. On the verge of getting into a fight, Jason used his aura to introduce a subtle but pervasive sense of calm. The men exchanged more insults but didn’t come to blows, storming off in different directions.

“Did you...?” Farrah asked, giving Jason a side glance as they moved on.

“A little bit,” he admitted.

“You’re directly influencing people now?”

He chuckled.

“No, it’s not influencing people as such. It’s more like tweaking the feel of a room. Have you ever been around a bunch of people, having a good time, and then someone comes in and announces that something bad has happened?”

“Sure.”

“The atmosphere of the room goes from fun to tense or unhappy straight away right?”

“I’ve felt that, yeah,” Travis said.

“What I did was something like that,” Jason explained.

“I wouldn’t even know how to even attempt that kind of aura control,” Farrah said.

“It’s a messenger trick,” Jason said. “They use it to make impressive entrances or cow their slaves. It’s like background music in a film; the people involved can’t hear it, but it impacts the mood.”

“Where did you learn to use your aura like a messenger?” Gabrielle asked, her tone accusatory.

“Your boss didn't tell you where I learned it?” Jason teased her. He noticed unease in Travis' aura at the hostility between himself and Gabrielle.

“My lady delights in her followers seeking knowledge for themselves.”

“I can respect that,” Jason conceded. “I learned that messenger trick from a messenger.”

“You would traffic with the enemy?”

“The enemy in question is my prisoner, and he has a lot of free time.”

The teleport arrival area where they had started out was midway between Jason and Emir's cloud palaces. As they were the destinations for most of the people out in the rain, Jason and the trio of new arrivals were part of a flow heading for Jason's palace. Farrah looked up at it as they drew closer to the plain building.

“Why did you make it look so bland?” Farrah asked. “Just looking at it makes me feel forlorn.”

“It does look like an insane asylum from an eighties movie,” Travis agreed.

“It just came out that way,” Jason said. “I may have been influenced by the priestess in charge.”

“They put a priestess of the god of Desolation in charge of managing all these homeless people?” Farrah asked. “That's not a good choice.”

“It's a priestess of Fertility running things now. There was a Healer priestess, but she moved central operations to Emir's palace yesterday. They're focused on filtering out anyone who's worm-infested, while my place is pretty much doing food now. I tore the whole building down overnight and put it back up as a multi-storey food court. The Fertility church is supplying all the food, so their priestess is running the show now.

Farrah stopped and looked up at the building again. The other stopped with her.

“A priestess of Fertility,” Farrah said.

“Yep,” Jason confirmed.

“The Church of Fertility where their temples are all covered in murals of people... being fertile.”

“That's the one.”

She gestured at the blank, grey walls of the building.

“How does a priestess of Fertility inspire this?”

“I think it's because I *really* don't want her thinking about fertility-related things. But honestly, the Healer priestess was just as bad, but for different reasons. I'll give you a

sample of what she was serving in the cafeteria before I fixed it and you'll understand. Speaking of churches, though, what is Humphrey's fundamentalist ex-girlfriend doing with you?"

Gabrielle glowered but didn't rise to the bait. Instead, Travis explained the Church of Knowledge's role in his and Farrah's project. The church wanted input into what Farrah and especially Travis were doing, making sure that any otherworldly knowledge introduced wouldn't be false or damaging. This was not proving an issue as Travis actually knew what he was talking about, compared to Jason's fumbling efforts to explain scientific concepts. In return for being allowed to observe, the Church of Knowledge was providing resources and contacts.

"After all," Travis pointed out, "greatly improved mass communication would be a boon for the dissemination of Knowledge."

"I can't say that I'd be up for letting the gods dip a finger into my porridge," Jason said, "but it's your project. If you're happy, that's what matters."

He glanced at Gabrielle.

"Just make sure you aren't letting them participate for the wrong reasons," he added.

Gabrielle had already been astoundingly beautiful at seventeen when Jason first met her. Now that she was out of her teens and into silver-rank, she would be a casting director's dream Helen of Troy.

"I, unfortunately, had the opportunity to test out the weapons you designed for the cloud palace," Jason said, changing the subject. "I was a little surprised with the end result, to be honest. I was expecting something more like Gatling lasers than techno-eyebeam things.

"I'm not sure that 'designed' is entirely the right word," Travis said. "Your cloud palace has such powerful adaptive properties that it was far more efficient to provide it tools it could use to its own ends. Trying to force a specific result would be inefficient, not to mention fruitless unless I knew a lot more about how cloud flasks work."

"That's all well and good," Jason said, "and the results were excellent, don't get me wrong. But I really would have liked something with spinning barrels."

"Of course you would," Travis agreed. "Spinning barrels are awesome. I put them on the latest version of the Compensator."

Jason recalled Travis' unfortunately named personal firearm, a wildly impractical, belt-fed pistol. Travis was not a combat-oriented essence-user, despite possessing the gun essence. The Compensator was designed to make up for his lack of skill by allowing him to unload a surplus of ammunition. Sadly, the gun was as ill-conceived in design as in

name. Not only was it unwieldy, even with an essence user's strength, but everyone assumed it was compensating for something else entirely.

"Are you still using that thing?" Jason asked him.

"Well, not using," Travis said. "I haven't been in combat since..."

He thought it over.

"...since you broke into my workplace to steal a weapon of mass destruction."

"I wouldn't exactly describe that as combat," Farrah said. "The only person who pointed a gun at you was on your own side. It was that girl you liked, which can't have been a great moment for you."

"Could you please not?" Travis asked her, his voice almost a squeak.

"What weapon of mass destruction?" Gabrielle asked. "Was it like the one that felled the Builder's flying fortress city?"

"Yep," Jason said cheerfully. "Some people wanted me to do a thing, but I thought why not blow it all up with a weapon that can flatten a city?"

"You are a reckless maniac."

Jason gave Gabrielle a look that she couldn't quite read but made her flinch despite his not enhancing it with aura.

"As a priestess of Knowledge, you shouldn't have such strong opinions on things you know very little about," he told her in a flat tone. He gave no indication of having recognised the wild hypocrisy in his statement.

"You know," Jason said, turning back to Travis as the joviality returned to his voice. "There's someone floating around who knows about cloud flask mechanics, if you're interested in learning more about integrating weapons into them. She made the flasks that Emir and I use, and she's been staying with Emir. She's been poking around at my building for a little while now. I think she installed some back doors she's trying to get to work."

"And you just let her try that?" Travis asked.

"She's diamond-rank, what am I going to do? She doesn't seem to be getting anywhere, though. I've modified the flask beyond its original design parameters."

"You know how to do that?" Travis asked.

"No," Jason said with a laugh. "No, I do not."

They approached the main doors where people were filtering in under the guidance of clergy and other staff. Jason ignored the main doors and moved around the side, lifting his feet off the ground as the stone pathways gave way to mud around the parts of the building that didn't lead to doors.

“You move like a messenger,” Gabrielle accused.

“I tried walking like an Egyptian,” Jason told her, “but it was slower, gunked up my boots and left these little troughs in the mud for other people to navigate.”

“I see you are still a fool,” Gabrielle said.

“Actually, I dabbled in edgelord for quite a while there. It didn't work out. I've been working on myself, trying to get back to fool, and I'm pretty happy with how it's going. And how is your project going, Farrah? I'm assuming you're not here for a social visit or you wouldn't have brought Little Miss Grumpy.”

“We need to borrow your soul space,” Travis explained. “We need to do a bunch of tests on a bunch of materials, all of which are quite expensive. It'll be a lot cheaper if we can just replicate them over and over. We brought samples, obviously, so you can reproduce the material accurately.”

“You realise I'm not just a laboratory for you to run experiments in, right?” Jason asked.

“Where's Gary right now?” Farrah asked casually. “And, I'm guessing, Clive?”

“In my soul space,” Jason grumbled. “Running experiments.”

They reached the back portion of the palace that Jason had for the use of himself and his team. Rufus came out to pull Farrah into a hug and Travis held out his hand for Taika to shake. Taika ignored Travis' hand and pulled the skinny, alarmed-looking man into a giant chocolate hug. Aside from Jason, they had been the only two people from Earth in Rimaros, two strangers in a strange land.

They moved inside out of the rain, the cloud floor cleaning boots while people were still wearing them. Gabrielle looked like she'd bitten into a lemon as Jason's spirit domain cut her off from her goddess.