

## Chapter 618

### A Chance For Some Relative Quiet

In the atrium of his pagoda, Jason had set the cloud flask on the floor and placed a funnel into the neck. He had a large box of quintessence gems that he tipped into the funnel.

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- You have added silver-rank [Air Quintessence] to the cloud flask. Remaining materials required to replenish cloud construct fundament:
  - 274 silver-rank [Air Quintessence].
  - 311 silver-rank [Water Quintessence].
  - 2648 silver-rank [Cloud Quintessence].
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After the destruction wreaked in his pagoda, Jason needed to top off the base material the cloud flask used to generate constructs. Fortunately, the quintessence types required were extremely common in the Sea of Storms. His current notoriety had uncharacteristically proven more help than hindrance as he contacted a trade hall broker and, in less than an hour, had crates of quintessence waiting when he portalled to the Adventure Society campus.

That had been one of Jason's last jobs before pretending to go off with Soramir. He was now operating under his assumed identity and would not be emerging from the cloud house again before leaving Rimaros. Amos Pensinata arrived, along with his nephew, Orin. Estella Warnock showed up, not having believed for a second that the figure departing with Soramir was actually Jason.

Jason was in his soul space while Shade returned the pagoda to the cloud flask and replaced it with a vehicle construct. Estella, on her arrival, insisted on seeing Jason and, after some deliberation, went through the white archway to Jason's soul space.

Estella was immediately wary of the strange realm. Anyone who entered could feel its uncanny nature, but her senses were much stronger and more developed than most. She looked around the beautiful but unsettling landscape, unsure of not just where she was, but what manner of reality she had found herself in.

"Strange, isn't it?" Jason asked, suddenly standing beside her. She could sense that this was not Jason as she knew him, as he was part of this place. Or maybe it was part of him.

“Your senses will give you more insight than most into this place,” he said. “I would take it as a kindness if you would keep any such insights to yourself. Maybe tell Clive. He’d like that.”

“I wanted to talk to you. Before I finally accepted your offer.”

“I hope coming in here hasn’t put you off.”

“What is this place?”

“It’s a space that belongs to me. Sadly, it doesn’t translate into power outside it, except in a few specific ways.”

“Like making a defence specialist fall like a chopped tree in an instant?”

“You heard about that? But no, that wasn’t because of this place. I suppose you could call them fruit from the same tree.”

“I want some assurances before I sign on.”

“No,” Jason said.

“No?”

“No. All I’m offering you is friendship and trust. Where we go from there is something we have to work out together.”

“Does friendship and trust come with a salary?”

Jason burst out laughing.

“Officially, we’ll both be auxiliaries,” he said. “Since I’m just the cook, you’ll get paid more than I will.”

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The pagoda dissolved into cloud stuff that swept into the flask over the course of several minutes, like a genie slowly returning to its lamp. Shade then produced a new construct, this one a vehicle. It was different from what the team was already calling the Carlos Crime Wagon, which was a massive bus in plain shades of khaki and grey, dominated by heavy bolted plates.

Until it reached gold-rank, the cloud flask wouldn’t be able to produce the ocean-liner sized vessel that Emir could, but it could still manage something the size of a superyacht. It had similarities to a large leisure craft in design, but instead of tapering to a sleek hull to cut through the water, it spread out like a massive hovercraft.

Being made of magic clouds, it didn’t require the engineering and storage spaces of a yacht from Earth. Along with magical propulsion that did not require an engine room, Jason had fed enough low-rank dimensional quintessence into the cloud flask that it could make modest dimensional storage cupboards. This meant a lot more internal space for accommodation and leisure, and less for cargo and space-eating cabin wardrobes.

There was still a bridge, from which Shade would pilot the vehicle. It was on the top covered deck, along with the owner's cabin, with only an open roof deck above. Open areas featured at the front and rear of the two main decks as well, set up for lounging or launching smaller vehicles. Both Clive and Belinda had obtained skimmers that were parked in dimensional bays by the lower starboard deck.

Most of the cabins were below deck, while the two main decks were defined by purpose. The lower main deck was dominated by a sprawling dining bar lounge, which was the main congregating area on board. It also contained a generous galley. The upper main deck was more for the business of adventuring, mostly taken up by a spacious training room, but also with conference and briefing rooms. It was a small command centre for the two adventuring teams that would be aboard.

Arriving shortly before the cloud yacht's departure had been Arabelle and Callum Morse, whose visible agitation was a long way from his familiar stoicism. Like Carlos, they were relegated to their own transport, with a more modest vehicle. It was a skimmer designed for both land and calm waters, with seating for two and some compact bunks. Jason wasn't going to allow Callum in the cloud yacht, even if Arabelle insisted that Jason hear the man out, sooner or later. Jason had chosen later, leaving the pair to trail behind.

Arabelle was going to be part of Carlos' team anyway, but she didn't trust Callum left to his own devices. For that reason, she stayed with him in their own vehicle instead of joining Jason on the yacht or Carlos in the crime wagon. It wasn't like she and Callum hadn't shared close confines before, in their days on the same adventuring team.

The final arrivals were the remainder of Orin Pensinata's team. Jason had been reluctant to accept their presence at first, as had Orin's uncle, Amos. Orin had proven intractable on this, however, and Jason had sympathy for someone not wanting to be separated from their team. Using the Shade body he had left with Liara for communication purposes, he had her run background on the team before accepting their presence. He had worked with the team before, and knew that while their experience was limited, their training and discipline – at least while on the job – were respectable. They were guild elites, and he'd seen their power and teamwork firsthand.

Finally, not long before the sun was due to rise, the procession of vehicles set out. They left Arnote and headed south, moving over a quiet sea to the mainland. Jason and Carlos' vehicles could both fly in the high-magic zone, but neither did. The crime wagon and Callum's skimmer van hovered a few metres over the water which consumed the spirit coins they used as fuel at a much more economical rate.

Jason had the advantage of feeding the cloud yacht magic from his soul space, but he had no interest in rushing. He had played enough open-world games to know that once you unlocked flying movement, the wonder of exploration became greatly diminished. As such, he let the cloud yacht rest on the surface of the water like a hovercraft, only hovering up to remain level in the face of larger waves.

As the vehicles moved away from Rimaros, Jason sat on the upper rear deck, under an awning, while most of the group was on the roof deck. He sat on a couch to watch out the back window as the island shrank from view. Farrah joined him.

“Not worried about anyone seeing you?” she asked. “There are still a lot of eyes on us.”

“There are invisible screens all around the yacht that only kick in as necessary. They let in a nice breeze, for example, but keep out the rain. It's also how people can have private conversations, since they act as privacy screens as well. I added that function to the cloud flask after seeing their ubiquity in Rimaros. From the outside, anyone trying to see us will only see a blur while the privacy screen is active. And because it's part of my spirit domain, even gods can't see through it, so anyone who can spot me deserves to.”

“Fair enough.”

Farrah would only be joining the trip to the limits of his portal range. Once they reached that distance, he would be portal her back and collect the promised rewards from House de Varco for winning the duels. While Jason and his companions set off, Liara would collect the rewards to hand over to Jason.

“How are you feeling?” Farrah asked as they watched the island shrink in their wake. They were both thinking of their arrival in Rimaros half a year ago. They were now at the start of the wet season in the tropics, and as monsoon rain started coming down, Jason's ability to see through the dark was no longer enough to keep sight of the island behind them. The rain ran off the invisible screen, but with a thought, Jason let the rain through. It pounded onto the deck and off the awning, which shifted from cloud-stuff to mimicking canvas. The canvas started thrumming as the rain hammered it.

“I always liked that sound,” he said. “When I was a kid we went on a holiday once where it rained every day. I spent the whole time living on snack food and reading as the rain fell against the tent.”

“Does it help? I know that you've set off on a lot of journeys that weren't what you wanted them to be.”

“It’s nice, but I’m just fine,” Jason said. “I’ve got a luxurious magic boat, good friends and maybe even a chance for some relative quiet, at least for a while. Also, if I can avoid getting killed too often, I might just live forever. That doesn’t suck.”

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Most of the cloud yacht’s occupants were on the open roof deck until the rain started. It spilled off the invisible dome over the deck that still somehow let in the wind, but most of the people took the stairs to the lower decks. Orin Pensinata and his team did not, remaining outside.

The leader of Orin and Kalif’s team was Korinne Pescos. They had first encountered Jason in a mixed-force expedition. It was a strange group centred around their team of guild elites, but also included non-guild members and a pair of princesses. Kalif had been prodding the non-guild members, to see if they had any spine to them. That included Jason after Kalif noticed that the princesses seemed to at least recognise him.

“What have you gotten us into, Orin?” Kalif asked. His brief history with Jason Asano was making him uncomfortable. Kalif had first caught Jason at a bad time. It had been at the height of Jason’s volatility from the continued absence of his team, even as the Builder, Purity forces and local politics all sought to harass him. His response to Kalif’s provocation had been to sharply demonstrate their difference in soul strength.

Kalif and his team had worked with Asano twice. There was the expedition where they met, during which time Asano went off alone and mind-controlled a bunch of Builder constructs through means still unknown. Asano had been a savage, solitary figure at that time, barely talking and rushing off alone, with no sense of teamwork.

The next time they worked together was very different. Kalif’s team leader, Korinne, had been in charge of coordinating the underwater complex rescue. Asano had been critical to portalling people in and had been with his team at that stage. Although they barely interacted, Asano had been noticeably different. He was more like an ordinary adventurer once he had his team around him.

That day was the beginning of Asano’s public notoriety, in the aftermath of the underwater complex raid. Rumours abounded, ranging from the unusual to the outright insane. Finding a way to portal past magical barriers was one thing, but who would believe that a god would visit Asano for a casual chat, like an old friend?

For many, the previous evening’s ball was the first time they had caught sight of Asano as Princess Liara paraded him like a prized pet. It had deflated many of the rumours about the man until people started causing trouble. The culmination of that was Asano dropping Hector de Varco, famed for his defensive prowess, like he was culling a

helpless animal. Kalif couldn't help but think of the time he provoked Asano and was stopped dead with an aura technique. In that moment, he realised how lightly Asano had let him off.

At that point, Kalif wanted nothing more to do with Asano and was relieved to hear then man would be leaving Rimaros. Then he discovered that their team would be going with him. Orin just looked at Kalif, who repeated his question.

"I'm not joking, Orin. What have you caught us up in?"

"That's enough, Kalif," Korinne cut in. "You know that this isn't Orin. It's his uncle. Our choices were to abandon our team member or to come along. Are you suggesting we should have let him go alone?"

"Of course not," Kalif said. "I course we go. That doesn't mean we go blindly, and you know that Asano and I have bad blood."

"Then why don't we cleanse it?" A new voice said. The team turned to look at Jason moving up the stairs. He moved in front of Kalif and looked up at the taller man.

"We didn't start off on the best foot, did we?" Jason asked. "I was in a bad place and neither of us were our best selves that day."

He held out his hand as a peace offering.

"How about we start over, and put what came before behind us?"

Kalif looked at Jason's hand for a moment before shaking it.

"Alright."

Jason flashed him a grin and moved over to the railing. The rain was thick, cutting off visibility, but he looked out anyway. Kalif and his team watched him, warily.

"I enjoyed Rimaros," he said winsomely. "I'd like to come back during quieter times. I never even met all the AI brothers."