

## Chapter 905

### Objectives

Located safely away from Yaresh was an outdoor testing facility for the Magical Research Association. The Yaresh branch was one of the first, when the association was still looking to establish itself, and Clive had selected the location carefully. At a time when Yaresh was still rebuilding and struggling to control the surrounding region, the guards protecting the testing centre were, by default, required to safeguard a wide area around it.

Clive had situated the facility between two major trading routes; the river and one of the few intact major roadways. Having outside forces secure them when the city was at its most strained for resources was a major boon. This, in turn, made the city look very poorly on any attempt by the Magic Society to undermine the association as it established itself.

The testing centre itself was a series of reinforced buildings, underground bunkers and open platforms, scattered across a wide area. The land took minimal clearing for construction, as it had once been farmland. The former landowners were long dead, and the nearest town was abandoned.

One of several open platforms at the facility was simple but very large, designed for the maintenance and modification of large-scale vehicles. Right now, five people stood in the middle of the platform, around a flask.

“Turned out not be as tricky as we feared,” Travis told Jason.

“I have been doing this for many years,” the Cloudweaver explained. “I have created cloud vehicles and structures for several churches, and they like to incorporate the power of their god into the design. I suspected that your case might be similar, and while there were additional complications, the principles were much the same.”

“What kind of complications?” Jason asked.

“The power of a god is simple. Clean. Focused. It doesn’t need to be sophisticated because the power is, for practical purposes, infinite. Examining your effect on the flask, it’s obvious that your powers are messy. Complicated. I am correct in deducing that you are at least partly divine, am I not?”

“Wait,” Hector de Varco said. “You’re part god?”

“That’s not exactly accurate,” Clive explained. “It’s more a case that his transcendent aspect has certain capabilities that functionally operate in the same manner as gods perform similar tasks, rather than Jason being a god himself. Of course, with the transcendent aspect of his being and his ability to undertake the aforementioned tasks, the practical difference is—”

“He means no, but kind of yes,” Jason said.

“Jason,” Clive said, “that’s very reductive.”

“Yes,” Jason agreed. “Clive, I don’t have time for the long version, and I’m immortal.”

“Part god,” Hector said. “It makes me feel a lot better about you winning our duel just by looking at me.”

House de Varco was one of the larger noble houses in the Storm Kingdom who did not have their family seat in Rimaros. As with any aristocratic family, they counted adventurers in their number. Their influence and reputation, however, came from the construction and trade of magical vehicles. During Jason’s long absence, Hector had risen to prominence in the family by championing a new enterprise: cloud construct modification.

While cloud flasks were rare, less extravagant cloud constructs were not. Small personal transports were relatively affordable, after which things went sharply up in price. They still weren’t cheap compared to things like floater discs, but they were convenient to store in small vessels, like the amulet mode of Jason’s cloud flask. They were also fashionable, with features like trailing sparks, shifting colours and other effects that led to very full coffers for House de Varco.

“Your power serves much the same function within the cloud flask as a god’s, but with some key differences,” the Cloudweaver continued. “Your power’s influence was not part of the original design, so mapping out how that affected the functionality of the flask was difficult. Rather than a well of divine power for the flask to tap into, your power affects the flask in almost every aspect. This is why my override no longer works, and that’s how your constructs can function as portable temples.”

“Temples to whom?” Hector asked, then looked at Jason. “To you? Because of the part god thing?”

“Yeah,” Jason confirmed. “Did they not tell you about this stuff?”

“They only just brought me in on this,” Hector said. “I’ve done some contract work with Travis on vehicle weapon systems, and he said he had a special project. Going back to the temple thing, is that something we could reproduce? I bet the number of churches looking for cloud vehicles will shoot right up, if that’s an option.”

“I was thinking the same thing,” the Cloudweaver said.

“Now that we understand *most* of your cloud flask’s underlying structure,” Clive explained, “we can look at incorporating some modifications that Travis has been working on for years.”

“It’s just a side project I’ve been tooling around with,” Travis said. “I’ve done weapons for your cloud flask before, but that was years ago. My magical knowledge was still very

Earth-based, and I only tapped into a fraction of the potential. Doing contract work with House de Varco got me thinking about it again. A lot of my work wound up in Emir Bahadir's flask, but obviously yours has some unconventional properties. And many of the ideas I had weren't viable, once we got a proper look under the hood. Of the ones that were, we picked out a few that were extra special and Hector had his people put a rush on manufacturing."

"Just what we've learned from working on this makes it worth it for us," Hector said. "You're going to have the most personalised weapon systems on any cloud flask that I've ever heard of. Anyone foolish enough to get in a fight with your cloud constructs will definitely know who they're up against."

"There are still a few aspects of your flask we weren't entirely able to decipher," the Cloudweaver admitted. "I'm still unsure exactly how it seems to have ranked up alongside you. No special materials, no upgrade ritual. The aspect we had the most trouble with was some kind of minor functionality which seems linked to external items. Without them, the function appears to be lost."

"Yeah," Jason confirmed. "It's part of a three-item set. I got this linking item back at silver rank when I killed this intelligent gold-rank dinosaur guy and looted his body."

"You killed an intelligent gold-rank monster at silver?" Clive asked.

"I told you about this," Jason said. "Most of the work was done when a proto-astral space closed with us inside. It spat us back out, with him most of the way dead. I just finished him off."

"How did you survive?" the Cloudweaver asked.

"Oh, I was all the way dead. But coming back from the dead is—"

"Kind of your thing," Clive said. "Yes, we know."

"I remember that," Travis said. "You're talking about Makassar, right? The footage was all over the news. Am I remembering you turning into a giant bird made of stars?"

"The star phoenix, yes."

"Can you still do that?" Travis asked.

"This avatar can, yes."

"That was sweet. Taika can turn into a big magic bird, too. Maybe I should build a jetpack with wings, like General Hawk."

"From *G.I. Joe*?" Jason asked.

"Are you people utterly incapable of staying on topic?" the Cloudweaver asked.

"Yeah, pretty much," Jason agreed as Clive and Travis nodded their agreement.

“Well, the point is, I would like to thank you for giving me access to your cloud flask. It took significantly longer than I had hoped, but that was ultimately more valuable, given the effects of your current condition on it. I am curious about that other functionality, however.”

“Oh, it just lets me pull out a little bit of cloud stuff and use it to make shields and such. It’s only strong enough to be effective against things lower than my rank, though, so I usually use it to make chairs. I was originally disappointed, if I’m being honest, but it’s turned into one of my favourite things.”

“I’ve been looking into cloud furniture,” Hector said. “I haven’t managed to make it cost effective yet.”

“We’re expecting the materials for the upgrades to arrive some time in the next hour or so,” Travis said. “We’ll get them in, do a little testing, and then we can finally get on our way. Everything else is ready to go right?”

“Yeah,” Jason said. “We’ve just been waiting on a ride.”

The Cloudweaver shook Jason’s hand.

“I must confess that I was trapped in traditional thinking for a long time,” they said. “Failing to innovate is one of the traps that come with longevity. Following the lead of House de Varco, the last decade has seen some remarkable leaps in — what was the term you used, Travis?”

“Aftermarket modification.”

“I still don’t like the phrase,” Hector said. “Yes, there are Adventure Society trade hall markets where you can buy cloud constructs, but that’s for the more affordable personal transports. Cloud vehicles and their modifications are a prestige product. The implication that you can buy them from a kiosk doesn’t engender the kind of image my family is looking for.”

“While we’re waiting,” Clive said, “perhaps you could answer another few questions I have about the system.”

Jason let out a groan.

“Fine.”

“Excellent,” Clive said and plucked a notebook from a pocket from somewhere inside his flowing wizard robe. “Now, last time we were discussing the degree to which you were conscious of the System as it operated in the vicinity of your prime avatar...”

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Jason’s first encounter with a cloud vessel was Emir’s. It sailed into Greenstone, the size of an ocean liner, not flying due the low magic levels. Now that Jason was gold rank,

he could finally produce a vehicle of similar size, and it flew away from Yaresh alongside Emir's.

Both vessels looked markedly different from that first look Jason got of Emir's. Cloud substance remained as the underlying structure, but significant external panelling lined the exteriors. For Emir, the panels looked something like blue solar panels, letting off a faint glow. They drew on ambient magic to fuel Emir's vessel more efficiently, saving on spirit coin expenditure.

Jason had the advantage of powering his cloud ship with his personal universe, skipping that requirement altogether. The dark red panels on his vessel were more defence-oriented, in case of monster attack. As their route would be taking them just north of the Pallimustus equivalent of Australia, this was considered a wise move. The island continent was known for high-ranking and dangerous monsters, and it was not uncommon for one to swim or fly northward.

Jason and Danielle were on the open deck above the bridge where Shade was piloting the vessel.

"You know that you could portal around the world, right?" Danielle asked. "We don't have to go the long way."

"Sometimes, the long way is the point. If nothing else, I need to visit places before I can portal there. Same for Clive, and Humphrey's teleports. I know they got the chance to travel a lot in my absence, but there is always more to see. And as for me, I didn't get that chance. I've missed a lot, and I'm going to make up for it. I want to see the world, not teleport past it."

"I recall my son telling me about this exact plan a long time ago. Roaming around the world on your eventual way to Estercost. You didn't make it past Yaresh."

Jason turned to look behind them as they sailed over the trees. He could just make out the light gleaming off the Yaresh towers.

"We have now. It took us longer than I expected, but here we go. I wasn't expecting the great astral beings to show up and tell me I had to play IT guy to the cosmos."

"IT guy?"

"Yeah, they broke their magic throne, so I had to go turn it off and on again."

"If I'm going to be your political advisor, I'm going to need you to start talking to people in ways they understand. Especially me."

"You understood. Context clues."

"Jason, you want me to instruct you on matters of diplomacy, yes?"

"Yes."

“Then I’ll try to explain things as we go, since telling you to do the opposite of every instinct you have might be considered hurtful.”

“So, you’re not going to tell me that?”

“No.”

“Somehow, it still feels hurtful.”

“Then you need to harden up. I remember when you arrived in Greenstone. I remember the furnace of fear and panic burning at the heart of your aura, hidden under the bravado and the strange behaviour. But those days are long behind you, Jason. Back then, you were a boy with potential. Now, you have to be a man who lives up to it.”

“My first day in this world, Rufus straight up told me that I had to choose if I was going to take responsibility of my own fate. Things escalated a bit more than either of us anticipated. I was never ready for dealing with all these entities who were so much more powerful than me. Now, I’m not ready to be the one with the power. It feels strange that I need to learn to be more diplomatic to avoid using it. If I just haul off on everyone that tries to treat me like they did last time I was on Earth, I’ll end up going to war with the whole planet.”

“The good thing is, having that power and not using it will be a valuable asset. Diplomacy is a war, and like any war, it involves influence, positioning, allies and, yes, power. Of many kinds. You gather intelligence and hope you know more about them than they know about you, without ever being truly certain. Everything is an advantage to be won and lost. If you’re going to annoy someone, it needs to be for a purpose. Deliberate. If that purpose is your personal amusement, you’re giving away advantage for nothing.”

“There’s a part of me that wants to march in and demonstrate that there’s no one on Earth that can stop me from doing whatever I want.”

“I imagine that would be very satisfying.”

“Yes. And it would start going wrong almost immediately. But I know it’s going to be hard restraining myself when I see something I can’t abide. I know that having the power to make changes isn’t the same as it being a good idea, not when my understanding of a situation is too shallow. That doesn’t make holding back easy.”

“I said that diplomacy is war, Jason, and wars have objectives. It seems that, right now, you’re not thinking beyond a desire to avoid causing problems.”

“I think that’s a pretty valid desire.”

“Yes, but it’s not a goal. Is it something you honestly believe you can hold yourself to? Can you stand by as some travesty takes place and just leave it to the people of Earth to handle?”

“Probably not, if I’m being honest. Here, on Pallimustus, things are simpler. No one is going to look at it as a challenge of sovereignty or a violation of local culture if you punch a monster until it explodes. Even when problems get political, the people here understand individual power. On Earth, they don’t understand the ramifications of people like us existing. They think of them as extraordinary threats, rather than the new way of the world. And when they realise that it will be a new way, the people who like things the old way will start getting nervous. Desperate.”

“Is that you’re objective, then? To help Earth smoothly transition to a new paradigm of power?”

“No. That will take time, and it needs to be the people of Earth that find their own way forward. I’m not one of them anymore, not really.”

“Then you need to find what your objectives are, even if only preliminary ones. It will focus your efforts, and let you go to Earth with more than anxiety that you’re about to break it.”

“Danielle, I can feel you pulling me by the nose towards something. Just spit it out.”

“You want to change things, yes?”

“Yes, but don’t tease me, Danielle. I’m not a quick learner, and it took me an embarrassingly long time to get the idea of unintended consequences through my skull. I’m not just going throw that out the window.”

“You really aren’t a quick learner, are you? Yes, if you bolt off with no real understanding of what you’re doing and try to fix problems, you’re going to make even more. But why am I here right now?”

“To help me with the things I...”

Exasperation at his own stupidity crossed his face.

“...to help me with something I don’t properly understand.”

“There is your goal, Jason. You want to use the power at your command to address problems that others can’t or won’t. You need to find the people that can help you do that without making things worse.”

“This sounds suspiciously like what Dominion suggested about taking over. Or a *Team America: World Police* situation.”

“Jason, what did I just say?”

“Right, sorry. What you’re talking about is a sophisticated undertaking, though, with a lot of steps. We’re talking about establishing something between a think tank and an intelligence agency. And that isn’t me making strange references, by the way. I’ll explain the concepts to you later, because they’re going to be important. And even assuming we

can make that work, we'll have to deal with the consequences of doing so. Negotiate how and when we can intervene when things happen. And what happens when we go back to Pallimustus. We're going to be visitors on Earth, not residents. What happens if we build the Justice League and then run off back to Palli?"

"Jason..."

"Sorry. But politically and diplomatically complicated doesn't begin to describe what taking this approach would entail. And once we navigate them fearing us, they're going to try and exploit us."

"That sounds familiar. Perhaps politics aren't so different over there."

"What's our first step?"

"Aside from me teaching you to avoid spouting a constant stream of nonsense? Information. Always information first. If you can contact this person you want to recruit on Earth, you should do so with haste. Before anything else, we need to understand what we'll be walking into."