

Chapter 734

Mothers

Comparing vehicles from Earth versus those from Pallimustus, each had its advantages. Magical vehicles could accomplish things that nothing from Earth could match, especially at the high end. No rock star's private jet or presidential aeroplane could compare to what the cloud flasks like Emir's and Jason's could do. There was also the issue of fuel, with spirit coins being far superior to anything Earth had regular access to, be it fossil fuels or renewable energy.

Earth vehicles, by contrast, were often superior in design, performance and utility, especially in the low and mid-range price bracket. A station wagon or utility vehicle was more practical than a land skimmer. Even an expensive electric scooter was faster, cheaper and easier to ride than a personal floatation disk. A giant, hollow bird construct was far more impressive than a private jet, but also slower and far less space efficient. It also had magic requirements, either high levels of ambient magic or someone with a specific kind of power to operate.

Earth was increasingly incorporating magic into technology. It would, in theory, eventually give them the best of both worlds. That was still some ways off when Jason left, although he had seen some magical vehicles. The magically-enhanced plane that had blown up with him inside it didn't fill him with confidence, even if the bomb responsible hadn't been magical.

In the wake of the transformation zone events that Jason had put an end to, Earth's ambient magic had risen. This led to aggressive moves to expand magical activity by the time Jason left Earth. Spirit coin farms were being established around the world, largely based on designs provided by Farrah. It was the drought of spirit coins that had restricted magitech research to critical projects, and an increase in their availability meant more everyday magic.

Jason was in the enviable position of already seeing what the best of both worlds looked like. The Reaper had given Jason a blessing that allowed Shade, a Shadow of the Reaper, to take the form of a mount. Mount, as it turned out, extended from magical shadow horse to void-black private jet. He frequently took forms that were similar to Earth vehicles but with superior designs. Some of that was magical influence, but mostly the designs came from worlds Shade had seen in his extremely long life. If he had seen higher levels of technology in action, he was happy to put it to Jason's use.

After making extensive use of this on Earth, Shade had carefully avoided Earth-like vehicles since their return to Pallimustus. Taking the form of elaborate constructs or bizarre monsters was much less efficient than technology-based vehicles, but Jason's feelings about Earth had been bitter. Shade had taken it upon himself to not offer reminders of that time and Jason had accepted the gesture with silent gratitude.

Time away from Earth, reuniting with his friends, and no small amount of therapy from Arabelle had helped Jason immensely. Once he started asking Shade to again use more practical vehicles, the difference in utility was not lost on the team. This was exemplified by the luxury cabin inside Shade's jet form as they flew towards a messenger stronghold with blinding speed.

Jason's cloud flask could produce what amounted to a flying pleasure yacht. It wasn't a match for Emir's ocean-liner-sized cloud ship as that required a gold-rank flask, but neither was ideal for short trips anyway. The cloud vessels offered peerless luxury and amenities, and they were far from slow. A high-tech private jet was faster, however, and Shade could assume that form in moments.

While certainly speaking to Earth design sensibilities, the jet-black aircraft was not an Earth design unless Shade was cribbing his blueprints from Batman. It was a VTOL craft, capable of vertical take-off and landing, and looked as if Lamborghini had built a spaceship.

Jason and his friends lounged in the passenger cabin eating snacks and looking out the windows at the clouds below. In the back of the cabin was Melody, Sophie's mother. Normally imprisoned in the cloud palace, she remained under Sophie's supervision while the palace was tucked away in its flask.

It had been months since Melody's capture by Jason's team. She had spent that time interacting regularly with Sophie and Arabelle but remained mostly locked away. She had changed after time with her daughter and semi-voluntary therapy, becoming less hostile and manipulative. This had some unanticipated negative consequences, however.

Melody had been magically brainwashed by the Order of Redeeming light, which itself was a creation of the god Disguise, masquerading as Purity. The so-called Flames of Redemption used to 'purify' people were developed from an extreme modification of lesser vampirism. The more she was able to fight the brainwashing it produced, the more the magical taint inside her fought back. The result was increasing mental instability as the aspects of her mind went to war, threatening to fracture altogether.

From the back of the cabin, Melody started furiously ranting, speckles of froth spitting from her mouth as she proclaimed the revenge that Purity would take on them all. Her

aura was a wild mess and Jason reached out with his own, suppressing hers and forcibly stabilising it. It was a technique that stilled her mind and caused her to pass out harmlessly. Sophie caught her mother as she fell and placed her gently in a seat before Humphrey got up, walked over and pulled her into a hug.

Jason, Carlos and Amos Pensinata had pooled their knowledge of aura manipulation and Melody's condition to develop the calming technique. It only worked when Melody was suffering extremes of mental conflict. Carlos and Arabelle had diligently monitored her to check for potential long-term damage but found just the opposite. So long as Jason didn't use it too often, there would be no lingering after-effects, even saving her from doing herself more harm as her own aura tried to shred itself.

An aura was a projection of the soul, using the body as a medium. Melody's soul remained untainted but The Flames of Redemption permeated her flesh like a cancer. With her body and soul at odds, the resulting aura projection was an ugly mess, which was what Jason had learned to shut down.

Jason's ability to assert himself against other souls had become a lot more refined. All he had known at first was how to make merciless soul attacks, something he learned the hard way from the Builder. After months of studying under Amos and stealing messenger techniques, Jason had a lot more he could pull out of his toolkit. The technique he used to suppress Melody without harming her was the most specialised and sophisticated expression of that he had thus far developed. It didn't free her mind, but it did disrupt the brainwashing. It always knocked her out, but even if unconscious she had a brief reprieve from undue influence.

Sophie and Humphrey moved up the cabin, his arm bundled around her protectively. They stopped in front of Jason who stood from his chair. Sophie's face had a naked vulnerability she never would have let herself show when they first met.

"I'm willing to let you try," she said, her voice barely a whisper. Jason nodded, catching her in a quick hug.

Some time ago, Carlos had proposed the idea of taking Melody into Jason's soul realm where his power could potentially help remove the conditioning she had been put through. He would not be able to cleanse her and let her out without killing her, but Carlos believed that, with enough research, they could someday reach that point. Jason's soul realm had already hosted research for Farrah and Travis' communication network and Gary's experiments in smithing and metallurgy. Carlos was certain it could shortcut his own research by years, possibly decades.

“We’ll sit down with Carlos and Arabelle and discuss it when we get back to Yaresh,” Jason said.

Sophie had been going back and forth on trying to get Melody into Jason’s soul realm. There was also the issue of getting her to go through of her own volition as no one could be forced through a portal. Another question was whether to let her meet with Callum Morse, who was in love with her and had been hunting for her for years. Given that Cal was almost as unstable as Melody had become, Sophie had flatly refused.

“Shade,” Jason said. “Turn us back toward Yaresh. We can deal with the messengers some other time.”

“We don’t have to do that,” Sophie said and Jason grinned.

“Everyone who thinks we should help Sophie’s mum instead of going to get me a big magic ball, raise your hand,” he said, not taking his eyes from Sophie. Everyone raised their hands except for Sophie herself and puppy Stash, sitting in Humphrey’s seat. He raised a paw instead, waving it at Sophie.

High in the sky above Yaresh, Shade’s jet form dispersed into a cloud of darkness, dropping his passengers into open air. Those unable to fly themselves were encased in black jet suits, the kind Jason’s sister disapproved of his niece using. Magic resolved some of the practical issues of the purely technological versions, notably heat and fuel, making them more sleek and practical than the Earth original.

From above, the city looked like the subject of a sustained bombing campaign. The shining towers and ziggurats of metal and glass at the heart of the city had been hit hard, many toppled or caved in. Even the most intact were scarred and blemished with the marks of high-level magical combat.

The rest of the city was made up of traditional elven design, with plant-shaped living trees combined with more traditional building materials. Many of the trees were dead, even uprooted entirely. Others were already in the process of repair, which meant specialised healing as much as masonry magic.

The small handful of almost undamaged areas stood in stark contrast to the rest of the city. The ducal palace and the campuses for the Adventure and Magic Societies had stronger magical protection than even the bunkers in which the populace had hidden throughout the attack.

As they descended from the sky, flying adventurers rose from the city to challenge their approach. The team didn’t begrudge the city being wary of invaders from the sky and happily identified themselves with their Adventure Society badges. The new spot for the

adventurer vehicles was outside the city, Emir's cloud palace made an unmistakable landmark, but the team went into the city instead. They aimed for what once had been the area of Yaresh where visiting adventurers would park their large vehicles. It had weathered the attack on the city better than most, and the damaged vehicles had all moved on.

The adventurer vehicles were gone, a massive logistics centre in their place. It scrambled to provide the food, water, shelter, medical and hygiene facilities the almost entirely displaced population required. In the team's absence, the logistics hub had grown into a small town in its own right. The blank, seamless buildings told a story of stone-shaping for rapid construction while showing more care than the quickly tossed-up buildings from right after the attack. A few of those still stood, their rough walls standing out from the rest.

They landed in a large square, the open space used as a handy thoroughfare by hundreds at a time. They got some looks as they reached the ground, but a few odd adventurers weren't much of a spectacle. They found some benches around the edge of the square and sat down to discuss the next move.

As was usually the case with major city squares, temples made up many of the buildings with prime frontal real estate. These newly built worship houses lacked the usual ostentation, however, being little different from the buildings around them. That was only true to the eye, however, as the divine auras coming from the sanctified grounds were unmistakable.

"Funny how these temples feel a lot like the cloud box you've had me cooped up in for months," Melody pointed out. "I'm surprised the gods put up with you, Asano."

She was once more awake and calm, although Sophie stood over her like a prison guard. Jason flashed her a grin.

"So is everyone else," he told her and she laughed.

"Are you sure you want to stick with the boring one?" Melody asked her daughter.

"Humphrey isn't boring," Sophie said, her voice heavy with the frustration of weary repetition.

"What is it with you and people's mothers?" Neil asked Jason.

"I don't have a thing with people's mothers," Jason said.

"Oh, come on," Neil said. "We've all seen you and Humphrey's mother together."

"Neil..." Humphrey growled.

Neil remained unintimidated, partly because he knew Humphrey and partly because Humphrey's stern visage was undercut by the tiny colourful bird perched on his head.

“When was the last time you saw your dad?” Neil asked Humphrey. “Are you *completely* sure Jason and your mum didn’t quietly bump him off? Also, it undercuts how intimidating you are with an adorable bird on your head.”

Stash's attempt at an intimidating chirp garnered immediate praise for cuteness that he lapped up. Immediately forgetting his support of Humphrey, he flittered to Neil's shoulder to enjoy gentle finger strokes.

“Traitor,” Humphrey grumbled.