

Chapter 474

I Don't Need to Invent Ice Cream

The kids playing in the river spotted Farrah disabling the magical barrier around the hole in the ground and came ashore to watch her uproot the fence.

"You can fix that afterwards, right?" Rufus asked.

"Easily," Farrah said. "It's designed to be easy to maintain, so I'm not damaging it at all."

When she was done, Jason set down the cloud flask which started spilling out cloud-stuff to slowly form his new cloud house right over the hole.

The three adults watched as one of the bolder children, egged on by her friends, came up to touch the cloud stuff as it was taking shape. She giggled as the cloud stuff passed through her fingers and shortly after, the children were charging at the walls and springing off like it was a bouncy castle. They only stopped when the house was complete and solidified into a shape that matched the surrounding houses. This drew a chorus of boos from the children.

While the house was forming, the neighbours, keeping an eye on the kids, had come out to take stock of Jason and the others. The presence of Argy and Jason's friendliness quickly smoothed out any friction and they went away anticipating a neighbourhood barbecue.

"We only have so much time to make preparations," Rufus said. "It will only take a few days for the rising magical saturation to start triggering manifestations in earnest. As for the Builder's forces, who knows how or when they'll arrive?"

Farrah nodded.

"We need to gear up first," she said. "We've been making do with what items we could loot, make or trade but Greenstone was bad enough and Earth was worse. Now we can finally get some equipment befitting our rank."

"Alright," Jason said. "Let's take a little tour of the new homestead, grab some lunch at the market then portal back to Livaros."

They thanked Argy, who promised to spread the word about the barbecue.

"Tomorrow night, then," Argy said. "You are going to have enough food, right?"

"I was more thinking just some of the neighbours," Jason said to Rufus and Farrah as he waved at Argy walking off into the distance. "I get the feeling I should check out that market, maybe stock up the food supply a little more."

They went inside the cloud house, which was not disguised as a normal building on the inside and was overtly made from luxurious cloud stuff. Although still primarily cloud white, the supplemental colours had some differences to what Rufus was used to from Emir's cloud buildings.

"Yours doesn't have quite the same sunset colours," he said as they walked through the house. "There are darker areas and the colours are a lot like your new eyes."

"Emir told me that each cloud flask will become different over time," Jason said. "They're bonded to the owners, who also make their own supplemental changes. Plus, mine is a little more bonded than most."

During his time on Earth, Jason had looted a vast number of quintessence gems. This was especially true in the latter stages of his time there when the loot was higher rank and he had stopped supplying the Network. Much of that quintessence had been fed right into the cloud flask and he had yet to test the full breadth of its capabilities.

The idea of replicating a mirage chamber was especially appealing now that Jason has Rufus on hand. He was certain that Rufus could help him master the combat trance and a mirage chamber would be perfect. Adding a mirage chamber to the cloud flask's capabilities was not yet possible, however, and would have significant drawbacks once it was.

Emir had given Jason a thick notebook with all his knowledge and experience from owning a cloud flask, which had been of immense help. This was how Jason knew a mirage chamber function was possible, if troublesome. The cloud flask would need to be gold-rank before it could handle the level of sophisticated magic involved in the complex simulation programming a mirage chamber required. Jason likening it to the CPU needing an upgrade.

Even if it were viable, it would require a very large amount of extremely hard to get and very high-rank quintessence, along with other rare and expensive materials. Beyond the upfront costs, replicating the mirage chamber effect was extremely energy-intensive. Rather than fuelling it with a fortune in spirit coins, it was more cost-effective to hire out an ordinary mirage chamber.

Outside of low-magic zones, where such chambers were rare and privately held, it was more feasible to simply rent one. The cost of adding one to a cloud flask was sufficiently prohibitive that even when he spent a year in Greenstone, Emir did not do so. He had training rooms with cloud-dummy opponents that were good enough that it wasn't worth the effort and expense of a mirage chamber.

Jason's cloud flask was already different to Emir's, with even the usage over time impacting its development. Emir preferred grandiose displays of overt magic and his cloud flask constructs were huge and eye-catching. Jason's, even in grand palace mode didn't match the size of Emir's.

At first, Jason had thought this was a function of rank, with his silver-rank flask not matching up to Emir's gold. As he forged a deeper bond with the flask, though, he came to realise that the way he used it was shaping it over time. Jason had almost always employed the camouflage variant and it had become increasingly flexible and responsive in matching both the local environment and Jason's desires. Each time he created a new vehicle or abode, now, it was like everything in it was exactly how he'd wanted it without consciously considering it.

This was true once again as Jason and his companions checked out the latest cloud construct that would be their home, at least for a while. There were a lot more bedrooms than they needed, which Farrah pointed out.

"Our teams are going to find us eventually," Jason explained, realising the cloud flask had responded to his desire for a reunion with his friends.

"Jory will most likely be with them," Rufus said. "I'm surprised you didn't set up an alchemy lab that only makes crystal wash."

"I don't think I've put in the right quintessence in for that," Jason said. "I still have a long way to go before catching up to Emir on that front. I managed to shovel a lot of stuff in but most of it was of low or mid-rank. Earth is only just coming into real magic. I did manage to dump in some higher-end stuff later on but it was fairly specific to where I picked it up."

"The second transformation zone?" Farrah asked.

"Yeah," Jason said. "Besides, I can't have Jory turn up and immediately put him to the grindstone. I went ahead and made other arrangements."

"Jason, what did you do?" Farrah asked.

"And when did you do it?" Rufus asked. "I was with you from the moment you left the Adventure Society building."

"Shade is as eloquent and distinguished an agent as a person could ask for," Jason said.

"Thank you, Mr Asano," Shade said from Jason's shadow.

"If anything," Jason said, "it's better sending him to get things done than going in person."

"Jason," Farrah said. "Remember the laying low plan?"

"It's fine," Jason assured her. "I've been careful. I remembered something Clive told me about a long time ago that would keep me from making a splash."

"Shade, I think he's ruining you," Farrah said.

"Don't bother," Rufus told her with a laugh. "There's no coming between an adventurer and their familiar."

Rufus was surprised at the dark expression that covered Jason and Farrah's faces, not knowing they were thinking of Noreth. The ambiguous antagonist had once been a familiar that turned on his adventurer, setting in motion events that, centuries later, led to a death toll of millions.

"Let's move on," Farrah suggested and they explored the unique feature of the house that came from the environment. There was an elevating platform that descended into the cave at a slight angle. Rather than seal off the natural walls, the house had left them on full display and illuminating them with colourful lights.

The platform carried them down to a larger cavern that opened out behind the waterfall. The cloud house created a soft, level floor, and Jason could feel an invisible mist below the ceiling that wicked away any moisture that would otherwise drop into the room. The natural walls and ceiling were on full display and, like the cave shaft, lit up with multicoloured lights. The cavern had been made into a bar and dining lounge with cloud furniture, although Jason could reconfigure the room at will. The furniture was laid out to make the waterfall opening the focus of the room, the sunlight sparkling through the water like diamonds.

"I think we found the VIP room," Jason said.

The island city of Livaros was rich in both magic and people. Like many such cities, it had several open squares set aside for teleportation and portal arrivals. While the arrival of a portal was not inherently dangerous, it was potentially disruptive and could lead to accidents. Using such means of travel to arrive in public spaces other than portal squares was prohibited.

When he had registered at the Adventure Society, Jason had been given an item that would give a visual indication at the Livaros portal squares before his portal opened there. The market district portal square lit up with bright silver light before Jason's portal arch rose from the ground and he stepped out, followed by Farrah and Rufus. Rufus took a moment to shake off the disorientation of dimensional travel that neither Jason nor Farrah felt, being outworlders with a shared affinity for astral energy.

“So, shopping,” Jason said. “We can keep in contact with party chat and meet up before we head over to the jobs hall. If you don’t have anything to buy, Rufus, get an ice cream or something.”

“What’s an ice cream?” Rufus asked.

A look of panic crossed Farrah’s face.

“Jason, you have to invent ice cream. You do know how to make ice cream, right?”

“I don’t need to invent ice cream; this world has it already. I had something a lot like qulfi when I was Jayapura. I have to imagine there are variants of ice cream all over.”

Her shoulders slumped with relief.

“Since when do you care so much about food?” Rufus asked her.

“You can eat spirit coins if you like,” Farrah told him. “I’ve lived in the land of refined sugar.”

Farrah's dimensional bags were laden with her share of the spirit coins they looted on Earth. She had fought far fewer monsters than Jason, having worked on the grid while he was clearing proto-spaces. She had also missed both transformation zones but Jason never bothered to count up and just gave her half.

As she roamed about the shops of Livaros catering specifically to adventurers, she had specific goals in mind.

Farrah and Humphrey filled the same role, that of brawler. High durability melee attackers, their purpose was to dish out damage while being able to take an amount of punishment in return. Their power sets had differences, with Farrah having a variety of mid to long-range attacks while Humphrey had higher mobility, but on any team, their position would be to both give and take heavy hits.

Once they started to supplement themselves with items, their differences in approaching the same role became increasingly apparent. Because items, unlike power, were purchased and could be changed, they had a level of flexibility and, with sufficient money, the wearer could even use multiple equipment sets to modify the way they filled their role.

This was an expensive endeavour, leading to most adventurers gearing up to enhance the direction their powers already lead. Belinda was a victim of this with her focus on adopting various roles. Not only did she need a lot of equipment but ideally, the equipment would be good enough to help compensate always being an imitation of the real thing.

Both Humphrey and Farrah combined durability with excellent attack power and the ability to operate at different ranges, either through mobility or ranged attacks. All of that came at the price of endurance, their mana and stamina unable to sustain them for long at full power.

The items they sought out highlighted their different responses to this shared weakness, shaped by their specific powers and circumstances. For Humphrey, his team offered both exceptional mana recovery and accelerated ability cooldowns. He leaned into this and equipped items that would accelerate his mana and stamina recovery. This allowed him to extend his impactful presence in battle and bring some much-needed reliability to the team.

Where Humphrey sought to mitigate the weakness, Farrah sought to enhance her strength. She had a handful of passive powers that amplified her basic attacks to levels that were acceptable, if not ideal. She generally used these to keep her true might in reserve for when it was needed most. In critical moments she would explode with power, unleashing overwhelming eruptions of damage.

She doubled-down on this by picking up items that either boosted ordinary attacks or offered significant but short-lived power amplification. Her mana and stamina items were powerful and immediate, at the cost of less sustained recovery.

Farrah's approach was the best fit for her powers and a good match for how adventurers operated in Rimaros. The local adventurers valued those who excelled in highly specific roles, even if that specificity came at a cost.

Rufus did buy himself some upgraded equipment. Having spent most of the last few years in Greenstone he had neither the opportunity nor the need for quality silver-rank equipment. Rimaros during a monster surge was a very different story. He had less to buy than Farrah or Jason, though, and took the time to casually wander the market. At a nearby stall, he overheard another variation of the conversation he'd heard a half-dozen times already.

"No, I wanted a whole case."

"I don't have a whole case; I have six bottles. That's the price for six bottles."

"Yesterday, that was the price for a whole case."

"Yesterday I had a whole case."

"You told me that you had a barrel of the stuff."

"Yesterday I did. I'm not responsible for your lack of decisiveness."

"Who bought a whole barrel?"

“I don’t know. Some lord brokered it through the Alchemy Association, and it wasn’t just me. If you want a crate’s worth, I suggest you grab what people have on shelf right now. It’ll be lean pickings until people get their next batches from the vats. Don’t expect it any cheaper than here, though. I’m only offering you this because you married my ex-wife.”

“Can I get a discount if I give her back?”

“Do that and I charge you double.”

“You’re already charging me double.”

“Yeah, well it’ll be double-double.”

“Do you mean quadruple?”

“Shut your smart mouth!”

“You know, this is why Ella left you...”

Rufus shook his head and moved on.