

## Chapter 672

### Brave Because It Can Win

As the night moved closer to dawn, the most likely time for a messenger attack grew imminent. Jason floated, cross-legged and eyes closed, over the roof of the cloud hospital as he projected his senses through the Shade bodies scattered around the city. His eyes shot open when he noticed something approaching the cloud house. He was alarmed because all he sensed was a small dead spot within his perception, subtle enough that he'd almost missed it entirely.

Jason unfolded his legs, dropped his feet to the roof from where he was floating above it and dashed to the edge. What he spotted below was Taika standing with another man at the edge of the camp, both looking up at him. Jason focused his senses, hearing the other man laugh.

"You're right," the man told Taika. "He does have sharp senses."

Astoundingly, the man was a head taller than even the mountainous Taika. His hair was a golden mane with long sideburns, while his eyes were green and sharp. He had craggy features and a hawk nose, with none of the polished perfection typical of high rankers. None of his massive physique was fat but he was a slab of a man, more powerlifter than bodybuilder.

The man was bare-chested and bare-footed, with loose, rough pants held in place by a piece of rope used as a belt. Hanging from the belt was a gourd and he held a closed umbrella, slung over one shoulder.

Jason leapt off the roof, using his aura to slow himself as he approached the ground and lightly land in front of the two men. Jason had picked up a few extra centimetres from ranking up, but in front of Taika and the stranger, he looked like a 50% scale model.

"G'day, I'm Jason."

No one around them cared about Jason, even after he'd leapt from the roof. The camp workers were busy and the evacuees had more on their minds than some adventurer. As for Taika's companion, Jason was entirely confident that lying was pointless. There was little point trying to be less prominent when Jason's instincts screamed that this man was an absolute powerhouse.

"Haliastur," the man introduced himself in a rumbling voice. "You've got quite the odd friend here, Taika."

"And here was me about to say the same thing," Jason said. The man in front of him did not register on Jason's magical senses at all, to the point that he suspected the man

only revealed himself at all as a test. Even so, there was a presence to him that transcended auras and magic. For most, that would be something that didn't consciously register, but Jason recognised the sensation.

Jason had encountered diamond rankers, gods and great astral beings enough that he had a decent sense of what he was dealing with when encountering entities vastly above his own power level. This was true even when their auras were far beyond his ability to read; there was something about their presence they couldn't entirely hide. Consciously recognising it was there required the kind of regular exposure that very few people below diamond rank had. Most would pass it off as inherent charisma, or some kind of subtle aura manipulation, if they noticed it at all.

Jason had come to think of it as a transcendent presence, but that didn't mean it only belonged to transcendent beings like gods and great astral beings. Both Shako and Dawn displayed it, and Jason suspected that he himself had the barest skerrick from his nature as an astral king. But neither Zila nor Soramir Rimaros had it, suggesting that the key was to touch the transcendent. That was something most essence users would only do at the peak of diamond.

This man had it as well, and Jason gauged him to be roughly on Dawn's power level, although that was admittedly a guess. His measure of transcendent presence was still crude and operating from an extremely low vantage point. Another guess Jason had about the man was that he was not an essence user.

Jason was certain that Haliastur saw through him while he saw very little. The man confirmed as much immediately.

"Blessing of the Reaper. Blessing of the World-Phoenix. Astral king, that's an odd one. You're the one building that half-assembled dimensional bridge between this world and some other one. Jumping on the back of the link that idiot Builder got himself sanctioned over. And you're the one Shade is attached to right now."

Shade emerged from Jason's shadow.

"Good day, Haliastur."

"Shade. I thought you might be embarrassed to show yourself after getting bound to some astral space for a few centuries."

"You've been talking to Umber. Shame is something you have for your choices, where I have no embarrassment over mine, even when the outcomes were not what I had hoped for."

"A healthy attitude."

"You two have met, then," Jason said.

"We have," Haliastur said. "It's a big cosmos, but the most powerful in any given region are relatively few in number and immortal, so we all meet eventually. Once you get to diamond rank, Shade can guide you to Interstice. I'll introduce you around."

"Interstice. That's the cosmic city-universe, right?"

"Yes."

"And what brings you to this world?" Jason asked. "Is this something to do with the former First Sister of the World Phoenix? She already left."

Haliastur raised his eyebrows.

"Little Dawnie was here? What for?"

"Him," Taika said, nodding at Jason.

"I'm just another pawn the World-Phoenix pushed into place," Jason said.

"I imagine you're not used to people seeing through your lies," Haliastur said, his voice showing no signs of taking offence. "How does a silver-ranker know Dawn?"

"He more than knows her," Taika interjected. "He..."

Taika's chocolate skin turned milk chocolate as he paled under Jason's glare.

"...knows her quite well," he finished lamely. Haliastur glanced at Taika with another chuckle.

"How did you and Taika meet?" Jason asked.

"How did you and Dawn meet?" Haliastur countered.

"The World-Phoenix sent her to make me save the world. Not this one. The one at the other end of that link."

"And did you?"

"Twice. Working on a third time, which should be the end of it."

"The bridge."

"Yep."

"It's an incomplete mess."

"Tell me about it. I don't suppose you know how to finish it?"

"I do not."

"I guess it's back to the plan of beating astral magic out of the messengers."

Haliastur threw back his head and let out a laugh that felt like an earthquake.

"I like you, Jason Asano. You have a fun friend here, Taika."

"And how did you meet?"

"I've been looking for something for a couple of decades. I think it's in this city. I came across Taika and saw him using his powers. I happened to have some insights I thought he could use, so I introduced myself. It turns out that we get along quite well."

"This thing you're looking for," Jason said. "Is it a threat?"

"Oh, yes," Haliastur said, then gestured at the camp. "You've seen that the messengers like to use apocalypse beasts as indiscriminate weapons."

"Unfortunately," Jason said.

"You will find that what they have done here is not unique. Such disasters are being launched all over this world. They aren't likely to actually cause an apocalypse, as the messengers know better than to use something that they can't control."

"I get the impression that they dislike an absence of control."

"Very true. But they will cause considerable damage and something could easily get out of hand. I have been pursuing one of these apocalypse beasts for a little time now, as I said. Have you ever heard of a naga genesis egg?"

"No," Jason said. "Shade?"

"I know of it by reputation," Shade said. "My understanding is that it consumes flesh and converts it into a serpent race called the naga. It can wipe out an entire world, replacing it with the serpent people."

"We have myths about them in my world," Jason said. "Not the egg bit, that I've heard of, but the serpent people. What we really need is..."

Jason looked to Taika, thinking about his confluence essence. How would Haliastur, who Jason was convinced was not an essence user, be able to help Taika, who was? He looked at Haliastur, the gourd at his belt and the umbrella slung over his shoulder. Haliastur, who had been chasing a naga egg for decades.

"I don't suppose that there's amrita in that gourd?" Jason asked.

Haliastur let out another laugh.

"Amrita?" Taika asked. "I have an essence ability called that."

"Your friend here has figured me out," Haliastur told him.

"Are you going to help us?" Jason asked.

"I am here for the naga egg, which is not so slight a thing as world-taker worms. I do not know how they've been keeping it dormant or hidden, but if it becomes active, removing it will be help enough, believe me."

"I do," Jason said. "If it comes to—"

Jason and Haliastur both turned towards the centre of the city with stern expressions.

"What is it?" Taika asked. He wasn't quite silver yet, and even if he had been, would not match the aura senses of either of the others.

"Some manner of aura burst," Haliastur said. "It started at silver rank and grew to gold very quickly. I believe it is the egg."

"I know that aura," Jason said. "Or I did before it became warped and turned gold. It belonged to another outworlder. He used to be a valash."

Haliastur's eyes went wide.

"So that's how they did it."

"Meaning?" Jason asked.

"I think that the messengers took a soul, modified it, wrapped it around the egg and shoved the egg into this world. Artificially creating an outworlder whose soul served as a barrier to contain the egg."

"Can they do that to a soul?"

"Difficult. But possible, if you're willing to perform soul engineering, which most are not, and you have access to messenger astral magic. One of their astral kings could do it if they intervened personally. A proper astral king, not a baby one like you."

"Where do they get the soul? It would have to be a volunteer or they couldn't touch it, right?"

"Yes, but you can torture someone's soul until they become a volunteer."

"I'm familiar with the process."

Haliastur looked Jason up and down again.

"So I see."

"I once saw a disembodied soul used as a magical barrier."

Haliastur nodded.

"Soul engineering. It can be used for various purposes. Where did you see something like that?"

"An astral space that used to be an astral vessel of the Builder, until the Reaper's people stole it."

"You live an interesting life."

"Something tells me that tedium isn't a problem for you, either. Why aren't you rushing over to where that aura surge was?"

"The egg is awakening. If it senses my presence while it is still taking its initial form it will panic and expend all of its gathered power immediately. That will cut off its potential for overrunning this world, but flood the city with serpents. The people of this city will die before I can stop them all."

"So, you let it grow up into a monster brave enough to take you on and then kill it?"

"That is the idea."

"Uh, what if it's brave because it can win?" Taika asked.

"It can't," Jason and Haliastur said simultaneously. Haliastur grinned.

“That should be long enough,” he said. “Genesis eggs experience explosive growth. I will try to minimise the damage to the city, but you should stay clear.”

“Oh, that’s all you, bloke. If that thing is kicking off, the messenger attack probably isn’t far behind.”

Haliastur launched into the air, transforming into a golden bird.

“What the hell is that bloke?” Taika asked. “And why were you so sure he can win?”

“He’s a garuda. Or *the* garuda; I don’t know how the real thing differs from the myths. But garuda is the devourer of serpents. Naga in particular, which is how I figured out what he is.”

“Garuda is my confluence essence.”

“Yep. That’s why your new meditation technique works so well.”

“That’s pretty sweet, bro. I do have one question, though.”

“What’s that?” Jason asked.

“What’s a garuda?”

Jason turned to look at him.

“Seriously? You have the garuda confluence and you don’t know what a garuda is?”

“I got an ability from it called Feaster of Serpents, so I thought it was a specialty chef thing.”

“A chef thing? Why would you think that?”

“Your sister has chef powers.”

“My sister’s a chef! What other powers did you get from that confluence?”

“Amrita. It summons a jar of stuff to drink.”

“Okay, that’s fair. What else?”

“One is called Brother of the Dawn. Unbowed is the one I got with the garuda essence.”

“They don’t sound very culinary. What about the last one?”

“It’s called God-Striking Fist.”

“God-Striking Fist?”

“Yep.”

“And you thought it was some kind of cooking confluence?”

“You never know with awakening stones. I thought it might be an *Iron Chef* thing.”

“What awakening stone did you use to get that?”

“Defiance.”

“You thought an awakening stone of defiance gave you an ability from a chef-type essence called God-Striking Fist?”

“Some of those chefs are pretty rough. What about that bloke who swears all the time?”

“Taika?”

“Yeah, bro?”

“By any chance, did it just reach the point where it been long enough since you got your essences that you were too embarrassed to ask what your confluence was about?”

Taika bowed his head.

“Yeah, bro.”

Jason gave a good-natured chuckle, reached up to pat his shoulder, gave up and patted him on the bicep.

“That’s nothing to be ashamed of, mate. You have no idea how many times I’ve ended up looking like an idiot.”

“Sure I do. I know your sister pretty well.”

Jason groaned.

“Mr Asano,” Shade said.

“Yeah, what’s up, Shade?”

“Messengers have just been spotted by the city scout patrols. The city alarms will be activated very soon, so it is time to take down the cloud hospital and establish a bunker.”

“Right,” Jason said. “Let the high priestess know it’s time to evacuate the hospital so I can take it down. I just hope that—”

An explosion sounded in the distance and all heads turned to look towards the centre of the city. Dozens of giant snakes had risen over the city like the heads of a hydra, looming as tall as the city's towers. Light from the towers lit the snakes in ominous silhouette, making their visage all the more menacing.

“...something like that doesn’t happen.”

As they watched, another monstrous form grew up to the size of a building. It was roughly humanoid but with an eagle’s head, four arms and golden wings spread out from its back. It was draped in golden robes and its skin was emerald green. One hand was holding an umbrella and the other was holding a gourd.

“Bro, I can turn into something like that. I can’t get big like that, though. Do you think I will after I rank up?”

Despite the spectacle in the distance, Jason turned to look at Taika.

“You thought it was a chef essence?”

“That power is from the wing essence, bro. Calm down.”