

## Chapter 639

### The Point of Sacrifice

On Earth, the Asano Clan had a deficit of silver rankers. Taiko had been amongst the first trained in Farrah's training methods that did not use monster cores, placing him in the first wave of non-core essence users. The monster waves and proto-spaces were both outstanding places to grind out experience, working alongside the network, before the factions started fragmenting and his association with Jason became a problem.

Once magic came out into the open, Taika had moved his family; first to Asano village, and then to Jason's spirit realm in France. He had already blazed into bronze rank by that time and continued pushing towards silver. The revelation that the US and Chinese had cracked non-core training long ago and had hidden their elites from the rest of the world only pushed him harder, especially with Jason's departure.

Advancement slowed down once Jason stabilised the Earth's dimensional barrier and left. This brought an end to both proto-spaces and monster waves, and instead causing ordinary magical manifestations. This meant that monsters could randomly appear anywhere, along with essences, awakening stones and quintessence. They had none of the concentrated numbers of a monster wave or proto-space, however, and were considerably weaker in most zones. Only a handful of places had sufficiently high magic to produce genuine threats.

Opportunities to use combat for advancement became more scarce. That changed when Taika was drawn through the anomaly into Pallimustus, but not in an entirely welcome manner. Suddenly the level of everyone around him, bar his fellow Earth refugees, was higher than ever before. After reuniting with Jason his training stepped up, guided once more by Farrah, as well as Rufus. Humphrey also made a helpful guide.

Taika's power set fell under the same broad category as Humphrey's. They were both high-mobility brawlers, even sharing similar essence combinations. Not only did they both have the might and swift essences, but also confluence essences of magical flying creatures. For Taika, it was garuda, with Dragon for Humphrey. They even had abilities that were alike, such as conjuring wings, and both possessed the potent survival power called Immortality.

Taika's biggest issue was finding appropriate challenges. With all his friends and allies at silver rank, he'd been stuck in Rimaros taking what bronze-rank contracts he could. Given the team and multi-team approach favoured in the Storm Kingdom, as a

teamless bronze-ranker, Taika regularly found himself sidelined and stuck as a guard or a lookout.

It was only late in the monster surge that it started to change. As Jason rose to prominence, suddenly Taika found himself getting contract after contract that seemed custom-made to give his advancement the push it needed. Combined with the training from Rufus and Farrah, Taika pushed himself achingly close to silver while Jason was variously unconscious or healing after his latest insane feat.

By the time the monster surge ended. Taika was on the very cusp of silver, but had not quite made it. As the convoy made its way south, Taika was on the lookout for opportunities to get over that line, finally becoming an asset that Jason's team could make use of.

During the convoy's first night in the city of Yareh, Taika found himself alone on the roof deck, laying back in a lounge chair. In the cheap camping grounds on the city outskirts, there was little to look at, aside from enclosing rainforest and other large vehicles, no few of which belonged to other adventuring teams. That left the stars above as the only appreciable vista.

Rufus made his way up the stairs, taking a lounge chair next to Taika, but not laying back. Instead, he sat on the edge, looking at Taika.

"Humphrey's a pretty good adventurer," Rufus mused, as if the thought had just struck him. "He's dedicated. Like me, he has that human advantage of his essence abilities advancing a little faster than most. Not much good at low ranks, but it really starts to shine at silver. But he made silver rank in good time."

"Okay," Taika said, unsure of what Rufus was leading up to but knew it was something.

"Jason and Humphrey reached bronze rank close enough to simultaneously as to not matter," Rufus continued. "And as I said, Humphrey made silver in good time. Jason beat him by about a year and hit the wall fast. He's been sitting there ever since, waiting for the rest of us to catch up, which most of us have, more or less. The ridiculous duration of the monster surge helped, especially given how much of it Jason spent laying around healing up."

"Jason did a lot of fighting back on Earth," Taika said. "A proto-space or a monster wave is like monster surge concentrate. That's even without a ghoulish army, hundreds of thousands of zombies or whatever weird stuff he went through in those transformation zones."

“So Farrah has told me. At length. Adventurers manage their risk, but that wasn’t an option for him, from what I can tell.”

Taika sat up, turning so that he was also sitting sideways to his lounge, now face to face with Rufus.

“I know all this, bro. What’s your point?”

“At this point, Jason has probably faced more exotic and deadly combat situations, than anyone of his rank that I’ve ever heard of. I don’t think anyone with less than a half-dozen years of experience has come that close to death so many times without falling off. Not even Jason himself.”

“I’m still waiting on that point.”

“We’re all chasing him, now, and it’s not just about rank. He’s run a gauntlet and come through it hurt. He’s with us now, but not completely, because we haven’t seen what he has. None of us but Farrah.”

“She seems pretty strong.”

“She seems that way, yes. But she’s not here, is she? Jason is dramatic, and the way he handles damage is too. Farrah’s quiet about her wounds, but they run deep and are hidden well. She needs time, but only limited guidance, at least according to my mother. As you said, she’s strong. But Jason needs coddling, or he might break. Have you noticed how he’s withdrawn? How he spends more and more time with the higher rankers?”

“The ones who’ve been around enough to see the kind extreme situations that he has,” Taika realised.

“Exactly. So we’re all chasing Jason, not just in powers, but in experience. I know it’s been rough, being bronze when everyone around you is silver. That feeling is the reason that Farrah, Gary and I left Vitesse. But you’re just about ready to cross that threshold into silver now, and I want you to be ready for the change.”

“The change?”

“You’ll be able to fight with us, but that feeling of trying to catch up won’t go away. The power difference won’t be so great, and you’ll reach the advancement wall before any of us have put much of a dent in it. Instead, you’ll be chasing something more ephemeral: a sense that you’re just as ready to face what’s out there as the people around you.”

Rufus smiled, but his eyes were staring at the floor without really seeing anything.

“The pursuit never ends,” he continued, “even when the thing we’re chasing is imaginary. You chase us, and we chase Jason. I can’t even imagine what Jason is chasing. But we never feel ready, not really. Not unless we’re willing to stop moving forward.”

“What if I do want to stop?” Taika asked. “I never wanted to come here, and I want to get back to my family.”

Rufus nodded.

“Perhaps you’re closer to catching Jason than the rest of us,” he said. “He never asked to come here either, and found himself scrambling for power to survive. He has talent, and so do you, but it was desperation and challenge that let him grow so strong so fast.”

“I don’t think I can come back from the dead, bro.”

“You’re an outworlder,” Rufus said. “You’ve done it once. But don’t worry about that. Keep putting one foot in front of the other and you’ll get where you’re going eventually. The next step is silver rank, which is why I wanted to have this talk.”

“You think I’ll cross over here in Yaresh?”

“I do. The magic here is lower, and the Storm Kingdom’s ways aren’t as prevalent here. High-end bronze and low-end silver monsters are the bread and butter contracts here. It’s perfect for someone looking to cross the line. Go hard while we’re here. We want you standing beside us when we wind up fighting the messengers.”

“I don’t... you said I might be closer to Jason than the rest of you, but I don’t want to be the next Jason. I like him, bro, I really do, but he’s damaged. Even when I first met him there was something about him. I saw him let it out once, not long after we met. I saw him cow a room full of the hardest, cruellest people I’ve ever met, just by not hiding what he was underneath. He didn’t show me, though, and I sometimes wonder if I wish he had.

He shook his head.

“I’ve seen his family look at him and be afraid,” he continued, “and I’m not sure they were wrong. I don’t want power or to be important. Not if it leads to my family looking at me like that. Yes, they were sorry when he was gone, but he was gone. It’s easier to be sorry when they aren’t right in front of you.”

Taika let out a sigh.

“I’ll stand by Jason to the end,” he said. “He’s more than earned it. But I don’t want to make the sacrifices he made.”

Rufus grinned.

“That’s good,” he said. “The point of sacrifice is that others don’t have to make it. You seem to have figured out that you don’t have to walk the path life puts you on. It took me a lot of failure and loss to realise that. I guess you’re wiser than I am.”

“So, what now?” Taika asked.

"Well, you can step off the path, but you have to find the right spot. Otherwise, you'll end up in the weeds, and some of those weeds are prickly."

"Bro, if I hear one more metaphor I'm going to stab you in the eye."

Rufus chuckled.

"I'm saying get to silver. We'll find your way home, but you have to live long enough to see it."

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The revelation of a sprawling underground beneath the city was an enticing lure for Jason. He was shoulder to shoulder with young elves dressed in garish colours, some kind of punk trend, as they shuffled through tunnels where cheap plaster sealed the walls and ceiling between the roots of the trees above. The floor was hard-pack dirt, pressed almost to a stony firmness by countless feet. Cheap glow stones were embedded in the walls, some flickering, others fading and some missing altogether, pry marks around the indentations left behind.

The tunnel sloped down sharply and drunken young people slipped regularly, stirring confrontation as they tumbled into the people ahead of them. Eventually, the tunnel led out into a large subterranean chamber that looked to be one of several connected together. The walls and roof were made from sturdier brickwork, although patches of plaster with root systems poking through were still present. Brickwork columns supported the ceiling, placed regularly through the chamber.

Four of the columns marked out a square in the middle of the chamber, the sides of the square being metal cage walls. People were crowding around the walls, cheering and jeering at people fighting inside. Amongst the crowd, it was easier to watch the fight with his magical senses than with his eyes, and he quickly took stock. The combatants were bronze rank but wearing suppression collars, fighting it out with only their enhanced attributes.

Jason was using the crowd to practise extending his senses without a commensurate extension of his aura, which was still a task he was only beginning to learn. As such, he could only just sense similar spectacles in other chambers, all of which seemed to have bronze or silver-rank combatants.

There seemed to be some order to the proceedings that the locals knew, while the non-elves like himself seemed lost and confused. Jason didn't rush and used his aura senses, along with his ears to try and make sense of the madness. The first thing he found was a bar, where he discovered that cheap elven hooch had a sickly sweet nature that he was completely on board with.

From there he started getting a sense of the fights, how they were bet on and how they were organised. Eventually, he realised that hapless outsiders were regularly recruited into fights, relying on bravado and drunkenness to lure in the punters. The fighters were amateurs, for the most part, judging by their skill and the auras he sensed once the fights were over and the collars came off. It was in the deeper chambers where he found the real fighters.

The deeper chambers were less crowded courtesy of a need to pay for entry. They were also better organised, with an audience that was both older and more conservatively dressed. The security staff could have passed for fighters themselves in the other chambers, where the standards were lower, but not here. Jason could tell that the people in these cages were trained, experienced or both, and he guessed many of them were adventurers. There was even assigned seating, where the other areas had been standing room only. Jason discovered that most of the audience here did not come in with the rabble as Jason had, and had some manner of exclusive entry.

Jason froze, startled as he sensed something extremely unusual: an aura belonging to a species called the valash, who were not native to Pallimustus. Jason had only seen them when humans had been turned into them by transformation zones on Earth. He had needed Shade to give name to them.

They were a comical-looking species to human sensibilities, with skinny bodies and Chihuahua-like heads. Jason sensed the valash navigating the crowd in his direction, wondering if he had somehow seen through Jason's aura mask. What truly startled Jason about the valash wasn't his species, but something that made sense, given he should not have been present in this world. The valash was an outworlder.