

## Chapter 673

### A Man That Will Inspire Courage

The crash of wood smashing apart and stone being pulverised filled the air with noise, dust and splinters as Jason dashed through it. He dodged falling sections of ceiling and leapt through holes in once-intact walls, his cloak deflecting much of the debris filling the air.

“You’ll try to avoid damaging the city my arse,” he grumbled, his voice lost in the noise.

Outside of the central city area, most of the architecture in Yaresh was built with living trees as a core, moulded into elaborate shapes and supplemented with brickwork. The trees were usually of the magic variety, outside of the poorer districts, and held up to impacts very well. This was important when some of them were being ripped out of the ground, used as crude clubs and tossed around.

The building-sized garuda, Haliastur, was savaging what looked like an even larger hydra whose main body was an arena-sized orb and whose heads counted in the dozens. Prehensile necks were grabbing whole tree building and launching them at the garuda, who deflected them away. They bounced into other buildings, chunks bouncing off to inflict more damage as they broke apart.

The results were that the evacuation of people in the area was not going well and the casualties were mounting. Adventurers were rushing in to get people out alive, but the adventurers themselves were facing casualties. The closer anyone came to a fight between diamond rankers, the more the difference between life and death became luck. The spreading disaster zone at the heart of the city was an ample demonstration of that.

The unconventional structure of the tree buildings held up better than traditional designs, at least at first. Once their integrity was finally compromised, however, they collapsed much faster. Jason rushed through a building that was crumbling under the weight of most of another building, tracking civilians with his aura senses. He found them huddling under a table as he dashed into the room, watching the ceiling collapse.

Pushing his silver-rank speed to the limit, he launched himself across the room. He kicked away the table that would not shelter the woman and two boys from tons of stone and wood. Standing over them and spreading his cloak wide, he pushed against the falling ceiling with his aura, which wasn’t close to strong enough.

His aura slowed the fall only a little, but it was just enough for Jason to interpose himself between the ceiling and the people as it slammed into his back. His legs almost

buckled but managed to barely hold, trembling at the weight. He formed a shelter for the people he was leaning over, his cloak draped around him. Cloud stuff emerged from the bottle hanging around his neck, plugging the gaps between his cloak and the floor, filtering out stone dust and splinters.

“HUMP!” Jason bellowed, his voice carried on his aura to boom through the building, overwhelming even the sounds of destruction. Moments later, the weight threatening to push Jason down grew lighter as huge chunks of brickwork and broken tree trunk were tossed away.

Humphrey was racing against time as the floor under Jason and the civilians threatened to give way, just as the ceiling above had. As he had to be careful not to bring even more of the ceiling down, it was a race that Humphrey lost. The children let out startled screams as the floor fell out of under them and they were grabbed in a net of shadow arms, dangling over the hole now below them. Finally, Humphrey cleared out enough space that Jason could hand the children up to him.

Humphrey took the kids and Jason the mother as they leapt from the building that continued to crumble like a biscuit behind them. It was a tall residential treehouse, which was how it had caught debris from the diamond rank battle taking place in the distance. Humphrey had a kid slung under each arm, flying clear with his conjured dragon wings. Jason held the mother using shadow arms while his cloak spread out into wings of darkness, speckled with stars.

They flew into an area where they had set up a staging point in an open market. It left them somewhat exposed to debris thrown off by the diamond-rank battle in the distance, but there were no buildings tall enough to tumble onto it.

The staging area was covered by a dome of shimmering pale blue energy set up by Clive. Inside was Clive’s portal, through which civilians were being sent to the nearest monster attack bunker. The dome had no chance of stopping the larger chunks of rubble and collapsing building, but could keep out choking dust and at least some of the smaller debris.

“If I had a portal instead of a teleport, I could do more,” Humphrey complained.

“Say that when a building is about to fall on a bunch of people and you teleport them all out. Portals aren’t fast enough to do that.”

They didn’t have time to stop for banter and left after that quick exchange. Jason shadow-jumped through a Shade body and Humphrey leapt away as if shot from a cannon.

There was another portal site shielded by Clive's rituals, this one with Jason's portal. This allowed the team to spread out, giving them two options for where to take the people they found or rescued. Until messengers attacked and made it into the city, the team was spreading out, operating alone but with others close enough to offer backup at need.

Each team member had their own specialties, and they used voice chat to call in the right person for any job. Humphrey's strength and ability to fly were obviously useful, and he was able to dig out trapped people the easiest. The ability to teleport into spaces that he could see but not access was also a boon. Neil had the strength but not the flight, but his ability to shield and heal made him arguably the team's most critical member.

Sophie, Rufus and Jason all used their excellent mobility for rapid response. Sophie's speed meant that she could get to the people most in need while Rufus could use his two short-range teleports, Moonlit Step and Flash step, to navigate buildings in the process of collapsing. Jason's biggest advantage was that his aura senses could pick people out that the others might have missed. In all the chaos, it was easy to overlook normal-rank people whose weak auras were on the verge of winking out. But Jason was able to track them down and feed them a potion, get them to Neil or both.

Clive was in charge of watching the bigger picture and focused on maintaining the extraction areas around his and Jason's portals. He had set up as many rituals as he could cram into the area without them interfering with one another. Mostly they were designed to shield the people from the smaller things that were harmless to a silver ranker but could still harm normal people.

Belinda's role was to assess and extract people from the trickiest situations. Her versatile skill set and power selection meant that she had the best toolkit for the trickiest work. Many civilians were trapped under rubble that was difficult to extract them from. Some were in danger of it collapsing on them while others were injured and almost any shift could kill them. Belinda assessed their needs and either extracted them herself or called in the right team member to help.

The one Belinda called on the most was Gordon, whose pinpoint beams were ideal for cutting through debris. All of the familiars were proving their worth, either subsumed into their summoner or actively taking part. Belinda's astral lantern familiar was inside her, allowing her to use eye beams similar to Gordon's. They couldn't cut away debris as fast as Gordon's half dozen powerful beams, but for delicate work, they were ideal.

Stash, like Belinda, was incredibly versatile. For clearing heavy rubble he used the form of a fifteen-foot gorilla with a face on its chest and a third arm where its head should have been. For snaking through tight spaces to reach people, he could take the form of a

mouse or, indeed, a snake. From there he could take a form like a dungeon beetle to extract them.

Dungeon beetles were predatory creatures with a very hard and mostly hollow carapace. They were known for taking their prey, entrapping them in their carapace and then burrowing deep underground, letting their prisoners slowly die of thirst before consuming them. As grim as this was, the hollow but very strong body and the burrowing power were ideal for digging people out.

Onslow, Clive's flying tortoise, was flying around the areas furthest from the extraction points. This was where Rufus, Jason and especially Sophie were to be found, and they could hand over civilians to Onslow to be carried to safety. Onslow was able to shuck off his shell which became a large and sturdy flying transport. Without his shell, the rest of him became a tiny and adorable green tortoise-man, which was perfect for calming down scared children.

With large chunks of falling debris bouncing heavily off his shell, keeping people calm was important. Onslow used his elemental powers as best he could, throwing out water barriers and exploding chunks of stone with lightning bolts, but his indiscriminate powers weren't the best for the situation. It was getting people to safety that was his most valuable role.

Colin was still hibernating in Jason's astral realm, with no indication of rousing. Shade, on the other hand, was characteristically valuable. He could scout spaces that even Stash couldn't squeeze into and allowed Jason easy mobility around the zone.

Jason found another group of civilians, trapped at the bottom of a hole. It was just wide enough to pull people out from, but too narrow to go down and get them. This was a problem that simply lowering a rope couldn't solve because the sides of the hole were sharp and jagged. Anyone coming out would require delicate extraction to avoid being lacerated to death on the way.

Jason called on Belinda's echo spirit familiar, Gemini, who could mimic the team's abilities. They both used Jason's ability to call up shadow hands, essentially creating a tunnel of dark hands that could lift the people out while shielding them from the sides of the hole.

"Mr Asano," Shade said.

"What do you need?"

"Both cloud palaces have completed the conversion to bunkers and High Priestess Shavar is ready to start moving evacuees into them."

"Alright. I'll be along as soon as we get these people out."

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Once again, Taika felt the frustration of still being bronze rank. He was so close, and if he'd managed to cross that line, then he'd be out in the city instead of playing usher to evacuees as the camp was organised to lead people into the two cloud buildings. Lines of people clustered together, snaking through the camp and leading up to the bunkers.

Emir Bahadir's cloud bunker was the larger of the two by a solid margin. The five-tower configuration of the palace was still echoed in the bunker, which was a smooth dome with five spires jutting up and out at angles, like leaning towers. Spaced evenly around the dome, the spires had a massive ritual diagram floating between them; an elaborate pentagram using the spires as anchor points. Glowing with shifting colours, the brightness of it painted the area in rainbow hues.

Jason's bunker was a pyramid covered in interlocking hexes of matte black, with blue and orange light glimmering in lines between the hex panels. The top of the pyramid did not reach a point and instead formed a cup over which a giant version of one of Jason's eyes floated ominously. Notably, the rainbow light from Emir's palace stopped dead as it approached Jason's, stopping as it hit an invisible wall that shimmered faintly as the rainbow light struck it.

Taika let out a sigh as he looked at the power the two buildings displayed. He was not a man with a hunger for power, but when people needed help, he couldn't help but feel inadequate when confronted with such displays.

"Your frustration is understandable," Hana told him. He had felt her approach as, like him, she was actively using her aura to calm the crowd. These people were only hours from having their towns wiped out by alien horrors and their nerves were raw.

"While this task is not as exciting or dangerous as running through the periphery of a diamond-rank battle," Hana said, "that does not make it unimportant. Panic could easily set in, and that will be a disaster. For all the power I possess, people would get trampled and die before I can restore order. I am grateful for your reliable presence, not just for your aura, but for you."

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### Ability: [Unbowed] (Garuda)

- **Aura (Boon).**
- **Base cost: None.**
- **Cooldown: None.**
  
- **Current rank: Silver 0 (0%).**

- Effect (iron): You and allies within your aura have enhanced [Power] attribute and resistances.
  - Effect (bronze): You and allies within your aura gain one or more instances of [Courage] when performing acts of courage within your aura.
  - Effect (silver): Negate the effects of afflictions that penalise attributes or reduce damage inflicted. The afflictions remain in place but do not take effect on you or any ally within the aura.
  - [Courage] (boon, holy, stacking): Negate the next instance of significant damage you would suffer or the next affliction that would be applied to you. If a single attack or effect causes both and/or multiple afflictions at once, the entire effect is negated. Minor instances of damage and less impactful afflictions will not trigger this unless sufficient instances of those afflictions are applied at once to have a cumulatively significant impact. Additional instances of this boon can be accumulated.
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The high priestess was a tall woman, although Taika still towered over her. She placed a comforting hand on his forearm.

“Remember that the powers we gain are not just about essences and awakening stones, but about who we are. This is true for our aura powers most of all. Your aura is inspiring, and that isn’t just a power that you have. It’s a reflection of something inside you. I’ve always held that as we gain power, it doesn’t change us, but concentrates us. It takes who we are, shaves away the fluff at the edges and leaves behind the distillation of our core natures. You are a man that will inspire courage. Lift people up. That is a very fine thing. Not everyone’s reflection is so uplifting.”

She turned her gaze to the ominous eye looming over the camp. Jason’s aura did not push out beyond the boundaries of the pyramid to impose on the camp, but essence users with aura senses could easily detect it. Even more than Jason’s aura in person, the building was portentous, benevolent but also judgemental. It radiated a sense that to enter it was to abide by its rules, that transgressors would pay the price of their sins.

“I can see why Asano warned me,” Hana said. “I’m not sure I want to send anyone in there after all.”

“I’m not sure you want to go in there yourself,” Taika said. “Jason has... views about gods.”

“My god seems to like him. Which is strange, given what I know of Asano. Certainly given that aura.”

“How much do you know about Jason’s background?”

“Not much. I can tell he’s an outworlder. Like you.”

“We come from the same world. Jason had responsibilities there, ones that shouldn’t have been his to bear. What our world taught him was that he couldn’t allow anyone to stand in his way when things absolutely needed doing, even if that meant becoming a tyrant. Jason is always the first one to stand between people and the bad things coming after them, which I think that’s why your god likes him. But he got used to people standing in his way, even when he was killing himself to save them.”

“And who keeps him in check if he won’t listen to anyone?”

“No one,” Arabelle told her as she approached the pair. “And that’s the problem. He never trusted authority in the first place. The other world taught him, when the stakes were at their highest, that he had to become the authority. One that no one can command. So now, he defies everyone. Kings, diamond rankers. Gods, great astral beings.”

“That sounds like a path to a quick death.”

“It is,” Taika said. “He doesn’t let death command him, either.”

“Everything’s ready with Emir’s bunker,” Arabelle said. “We should start moving people into the bunkers.”

“We’re waiting on Asano to open his building back up,” Hana said. “He wanted to show me in himself. He thought that there would be an issue with our priests.”

“He’s right,” Arabelle said. “You’ll see for yourself what it means to defy even gods in there. It’s unsettling, being cut off from the comforting presence of your god when you’ve gotten so used to it. You might want to put the priests in the other bunker.”

“We need people in both, so I’ll lead the ones in Asano’s bunker myself. Once he opens it up.”

Shade emerged from Arabelle's shadow and Jason stepped out of the familiar's shadowy form.

“Sorry I’m late. Dashing heroics; you know how it is. Anyway, shall we?”