

## Chapter 756

### Quick and Clean

Yaresh was no longer lit up at night. The tree buildings were toppled, lanterns no longer draped from the branches. The metal and glass ziggurats no longer shined in the city centre, having been annihilated in the fight between the garuda and the naga genesis egg.

Only a handful of patches in the city still shone in the dark. The most prominent was the Adventure Society campus, left largely intact despite being the starting point of the garuda fight. Some less important outbuildings where the fight had broken out were nothing but rubble, but the defences on the core areas had kept them intact as the fight spilled through the shining buildings at the city's heart.

The Magic Society campus and Ducal Palace boasted similarly effective protection and were all but untouched. The only other places that came close were the underground bunkers. Many of them were still being used to house the displaced populace, along with the tent cities dotted through the city ruins. The lamps lighting up these sad encampments were nothing compared to the shining city of the past and made up most of the city's nighttime illumination.

With the vast reduction in light pollution, the stars were more visible in the night sky. It was poor consolation but Jason still took advantage. He was reclined in a cloud chair, floating high above the city after leaving the Remore family to their reunion. Gabriel's arrival also reunited his old team with Arabelle, Emir and Callum Morse.

Jason had been studiously avoiding Callum and his continual petitions to see Melody. Arabelle claimed that Callum was improving now that everything was in the open and she could work with him, but the man's aura still felt dangerously unstable to Jason. Perhaps his old team would help balance him out; it certainly worked for Jason.

"Mr Asano," Shade said.

Jason sighed.

"You know, Shade, we're going underground in the morning. I can't help but wonder how long it will be until I see the sky again. There's a lot going on down there, and what little information we have is months out of date."

"It could only be a few days," Shade pointed out. "Get down there, trigger the device and leave."

"Do you really think it's going to be that simple?"

“Of course not, Mr Asano. But a positive outlook is more likely to achieve positive results. The anticipation of negative results can be a self-fulfilling prophecy, something I believe you understand.”

“I suppose I do.”

“Even if the messengers get what they want, that is hardly the end of the world. A phrase that is not hyperbole when addressing your activities, so be thankful for that. If the astral king gets her soul forge and this region avoids explosive destruction, that is at least an acceptable outcome. The astral king will take her prize and leave, allowing the city reconstruction to begin in earnest.”

“I don’t think the messengers see it the same way. I’m guessing the idea of me taking the soul forge for myself is a risk they are very much cognisant of, assuming that we’re right and that’s what they’re trying to make. They’ll be after my head, whatever the outcome. And what if I do get the soul forge? What happens when I become an astral king proper? Do I suddenly jump to transcendent-rank? Am I stuck out in the astral with a letterbox on my head?”

“Since when are you afraid of vast cosmic power, Mr Asano?”

“Power reveals who you are. On Earth, my relative power was enormous and I don’t like what that did to me. Am I better now? I feel like I am, but what if I’m wrong and I become too powerful for my friends to correct me?”

“Do you believe that you will be so out of touch that they need to?”

“There’s a chance. Even if it’s an outside one, doesn’t the damage if it happens make the risk worth considering?”

“I am not sure you should take your moral imperatives from terrible films about superheroes fighting each other, Mr Asano.”

“You’ve seen that movie?”

“You had me assign one of my bodies to Mr Williams’ shadow.”

“Right, Taika actually likes that movie. At least I know one person with worse judgement than me.”

“Mr Asano, if you’re waiting until you become a perfect man, you’ll be waiting forever. Literally; you’re ageless and it will never happen.”

Jason laughed.

“Thank you, Shade. Once again, your perspective offers sage guidance.”

“You are welcome, Mr Asano.”

“So, what’s up?”

“Lady Allayeth would like to see you.”

“No worries. Say, did you notice that Jali and Allayeth have the exact same hair colour?”

“I don’t pay attention to most colours. They seem pointless.”

“That explains a lot. Does she want to see me about that guy who tried to kill me?”

“Yes. She is awaiting you outside the interrogation room.”

“I can sense it. Any idea why Humphrey is there?”

“Lady Allayeth requested his presence to identify the man.”

“Interesting. Thank you, Shade.”

The chair under Jason dispersed, the cloud material being drawn into the tiny flask hanging from his necklace. He let himself fall, still laying back with legs crossed at the ankles and hands behind his head. Eventually, he shifted his weight to let his legs drift up, pointing him at the rapidly approaching ground. His cloak manifested around him and then flumed out, spreading like wings to turn his plummet into a breakneck swoop over the city.

Racing into the Adventure Society campus, he careened between some of the few buildings left standing in the city. Finally, he plunged into one of the many nighttime shadows, vanishing as if it were a hole in the wall. Inside a nearby building, Shade emerged from Humphrey’s shadow and Jason emerged from Shade.

“What’s going on?” Jason asked.

“They’ve gotten the man who attacked you to talk,” Humphrey said. “They brought me in to confirm his identity.”

“You know the guy? I didn’t recognise him.”

“You wouldn’t, although you have met,” Humphrey said. “You only saw him very briefly back when you were still iron rank. Your aura perception was weak enough that you wouldn’t have sensed his aura to recognise. Not from a silver-rank stealth specialist.”

“The man who attacked me was gold.”

“You’re not the only one who gets to rank up, Jason.”

“Now you’ve got me curious. Who is he?”

“A former member of the Greenstone nobility, which is how I recognised him. Lawrence Sparnow, also known as Mr Sparrow in certain unsavoury circles. He vanished from the city after kidnapping you for Cole Silva and hasn’t been heard from since.”

“He’s the one that grabbed me and handed me over for star seed implantation.”

“And was paid quite well for his services, it would seem. Using that money as a seed, he built a lucrative criminal enterprise. With the supply of monster cores being so high during the extended surge, he managed to accrue enough cores to hit gold-rank.”

“What is he doing here?”

"Some of that we can only guess," Allayeth said, coming through a door to join them in the hall. "The people that hired him were extremely careful about not exposing themselves. As best we can ascertain, the aristocratic faction who aren't happy about how things are going politically were looking to tip over the fruit cart. They wanted to kill you, Jason, to try and change things up by getting the expedition cancelled. Force the city population to be evacuated and founded again elsewhere."

"So, pretty much what I predicted would happen."

She rolled her eyes.

"Yes, Jason. I remember our bet."

"Would killing Jason even stop the expedition at this stage?" Humphrey asked. "We have the device, and the hole the elemental messengers dug to the surface. We don't need the underground tunnel the regular messengers have been sitting on."

"Perhaps, perhaps not," Allayeth said. "The messengers were about to hand off the device when Jason was attacked, but they hadn't done it yet. They might have snatched it back if Jason died. Also, I don't imagine you and your team would still be willing to participate in the expedition if he did. At this point, Clive Standish and Farrah Hurin are more important to the expedition's success than you are, Jason."

"They're willing to let the city be destroyed?" Humphrey asked.

"The aristocrats are on the back foot right now," Allayeth said. "The arrival of Marcus Xenoria and the unexpected support he has gotten from key figures in the aristocrats like Gormanston Bynes has left their power scattered. But the aristocrats still represent a majority of resources and power in Yaresh. Needing to rebuild would recentre their importance and let them re-establish their influence, building it into the very foundations of the new city."

"Can you use this against the aristocratic faction?" Humphrey asked. "We don't want any more interference in an expedition that already has too many uncertainties."

"I doubt it," Jason said. "I'm guessing they used this guy precisely because he was outside of their power structure. They'll have used enough cut-outs and blind meetings that there'll be no linking them to it."

"That's exactly what happened," Allayeth confirmed. "We'll try and make the connection, but for all they're mediocre at adventuring, the aristocratic faction excels at scheming. That's why it takes unpredictable outliers like Jason and Marcus Xenoria to force them out of their old patterns and slip up."

“My question,” Jason said, “is what was the guy doing here in Yaresh that they could find him to hire? And why would he take the job? Surely he wouldn’t have missed how much attention is on me right now. I’d have thought he’d be anywhere but here.”

“He was already here to kill you before the aristocrats found him,” Allayeth said. “He heard that while you were in the Storm Kingdom, you caught up with the man who hired him to kidnap you.”

“We did,” Jason said.

“He worried about you coming for him next.”

“I had no idea where he was.”

“He imagined the man you caught believed the same thing. I’m not sure you understand the magnitude of the stories around you, Jason, and the impact they have on people that hear enough of them.”

“I understand fine. Every prick that hears them either dismisses them as lies or tries to crack me open and shake the secrets out. Kidnapping me, breaking into my cloud house, seducing me.”

“Seducing you?” Humphrey asked. “Who did that?”

“No one yet, but a bloke can dream. Wait, did anyone try it? Am I just forgetting? Surely someone’s tried it by now. Did I not notice? Should I be paying more attention to this stuff?”

Allayeth looked nonplussed as Humphrey shook his head.

“Shade,” Jason said. “Has anyone ever tried to seduce me for my secrets?”

“Numerous times, Mr Asano,” Shade said. “They normally leave confused before you realise.”

“Wait, are you saying that I’m so repellent to women that they run off before I even notice?”

“I wouldn’t concern yourself, Mr Asano. They weren’t your type.”

“Really? I love confident, assertive women. You’d think that’s exactly what you’d want in a seductress. I know I do.”

“Jason,” Humphrey said. “I think you’ll find that perhaps your type had shifted somewhat.”

“Shifted where?” Jason asked.

“Upward,” Humphrey told him.

“Flying women? I hope you’re not talking about messengers because while they do have more startlingly attractive people who look twenty-five than a teen drama, they are off the table on principle.”

“No, Jason,” Humphrey said. “I’m saying that it’s all princesses and diamond-rankers for you these days.”

“It’s not my fault they’re the only ones around. I have to flirt with someone. I’m a magical being, Humphrey; I live on raw magic and repartee, and the astral only supplies me with one of those.”

“Jason, you do not live on banter.”

“I might. You don’t know how astral kings work.”

“Can I please say something?” Allayeth interjected.

“Of course,” Jason said.

“Always, Lady Allayeth,” Humphrey said. “We always have time for diamond-rankers, don’t we, Jason?”

Jason gave him a flat look.

“For your information, Humpy, the last two women I was intimate with were a bartender and a tavern owner.”

“And did either of them know your real name?” Humphrey asked.

“I wasn’t looking to get married. My type is quite inclusive when you—”

“Gentlemen,” Allayeth interrupted again. She was not used to being overlooked by silver-rankers and was finding the entire experience bizarre.

“Sorry,” Jason said.

“Apologies, Lady Allayeth,” Humphrey said

“Jason,” she said. “Explain to me how you can be out here having such a frivolous conversation when the man who handed you over for star-seed implantation is in the next room? He’s responsible for what must vie for the worst experience of your life.”

“He’s not responsible for anything,” Jason said. “The hammer pushes in the nail, but it’s the man holding it who builds the house. That guy means nothing to me.”

“Are you sure?” Allayeth asked. “I’m not certain I could be so detached about someone who delivered me to such a fate.”

“People try to kidnap or assassinate me a lot. If I took it all personally, I’d spend my life hunting down people for bloody reprisals, and that’s no way to live. I’m more interested in how he ended up here, coming after me.”

“I told you that stories around you can be rather extreme,” Allayeth said. “According to him, the fact that you escaped the Builder’s star seed that he delivered you to had always worried him. He feared what someone capable of that would do if you ever caught up with him. Then he heard you died and that anxiety went away. He concentrated on building a

criminal empire, to some success, and achieved gold-rank during the monster surge when the surplus of cores drove prices down.”

“They still can’t have been cheap,” Humphrey said. “Not for enough monster cores to hit gold.”

“But there was unprecedented availability, even if the price was still out of reach for most,” Allayeth said. “Sparnow has been very successful running a criminal enterprise so disgusting I don’t want to say what he was doing out loud.”

“That’s not new,” Humphrey said. “His predilections came to light during the trial of the men who had Jason kidnapped. Part of his payment was facilitating his appetites.”

“After the Builder decamped, the story about Jason’s involvement spread. It gets less well-known the further you get from Rimaros, but certain people always hear things. Sparnow had become powerful enough that he was such a person, and he realised that Jason had returned from the dead.”

“He must have loved hearing that,” Jason said.

“Sparnow immediately decided to make Jason dead again,” Allayeth continued. “He knew that if he didn’t kill you before you ranked up again, Jason, it wasn’t going to happen. He headed for Rimaros, where he heard about the other man. The one who hired him to kidnap you in the first place.”

“Killian Laurent,” Jason said. “He didn’t do so bad out of getting caught. I imagine he’s in a Magic Society basement somewhere, parcelling out enough nuggets to keep himself alive until he can execute an escape.”

“Sparnow doesn’t have the value this man Laurent had, and he knows it,” Allayeth said. “He has nothing to offer in return for staying alive other than the names of others who share his debased leanings. For him, capture meant death and he knew it.”

“So he came looking for the one person he thought would be motivated to hunt him down,” Humphrey said. “Only to effectively hunt himself down.”

“Travel was hard during the surge,” Allayeth said. “By the time travel routes opened up and he arrived in Rimaros, your team had moved on. The secret identity thing threw him off for a while, but when messenger servants started asking questions in Rimaros, he traced you here. He arrived in Yaresh shortly before the attack on the city and he’s been looking for a chance to kill you ever since.”

“But Jason has been roaming around the wilderness or spending time with gold and diamond-rankers,” Humphrey said.

“Exactly,” Allayeth said. “Meeting the messenger envoy alone presented a small but predictable time window. It was a risk, but Sparnow is a stealth specialist. His power set is

assassination-based, so he planned to get in, take Jason down and then escape before anyone responded.”

“I told you that the aristocratic faction caved on letting me go alone too quickly,” Jason told her.

“I already told you that I remember the bet, Jason.”

“What next?” Humphrey asked. “Can we use Sparrow to bait the aristocratic faction into making a mistake and exposing themselves? Trying to get what’s left of the city destroyed is outright treason.”

“We don’t have time to instigate the kind of investigation it would take to catch the aristocrats’ tail,” Allayeth said. “It is happening, but it’s unlikely to dig out proof and doesn’t help us now anyway. As soon as the expedition is away, we’re going to hold a trial for Sparrow to see if we can spook the aristocratic faction into making a mistake. It’s unlikely, but worth trying. Then Sparrow will be executed, unless the mercy you’ve been pursuing extends to this man, Jason? As the victim, your voice will make an impact on the sentencing. And if you’re willing to forgive messengers and the people who betrayed us to them...”

“He’s not part of an indoctrinated slave race or a prisoner broken by fear,” Jason said. “He’s a depraved predator.”

“Do you want to be the one to do it?” Allayeth asked. “We don’t anticipate getting much out of a trial, so if I let you in there right now, no one will say a word.”

“No,” Jason said. “I have no interest in vengeance and I’m not going to take joy in someone’s suffering, even someone like him. Using my powers on a gold-ranker is a slow and ugly way to kill.”

“He deserves slow and ugly, from what I’ve heard,” Allayeth said.

“It’s not about what he deserves, or what I want. The only reason to kill him is that the only thing he has to offer the world is poison. Keeping him alive would be doing harm. Once you have everything he knows about every other predator he knows, put him down. Quick and clean.”

Allayeth nodded.

“I’ll get it done,” she said and went back through the door.

Jason sighed and leaned against the wall.

“I hate making a choice like that,” he said. “I know I’m a hypocrite, with all the people I’ve killed, but when killing is the best option, it feels like I’ve failed to find a better way.”

Humphrey leaned against the wall next to Jason and nudged his shoulder.

“Don’t apologise for moral growth, Jason,”



“Are you sure it’s growth? It feels so murky. Am I doing the right thing with the messengers?”

“I don’t know,” Humphrey admitted. “I never used to get confused about right and wrong before I met you. Now I just do my best. Sometimes I’ll get it right and sometimes I won’t, and then I’ll do my best to fix that.”

“When did you get so smart?”

“Meaning that you thought I wasn’t?”

“Uh...”

Humphrey chuckled and looked over at the closed door.

“What was that bet Lady Allayeth kept mentioning?”

“After the aristocrats didn’t fight me on picking up the device alone, I bet her that they would try to have me killed.”

“What did you get for winning?”

“Nothing important. It doesn’t matter.”

Humphrey looked at Jason from under raised eyebrows.

“Fine,” Jason grumbled. “She has to buy me dinner.”

Humphrey shook his head.

“And if she won?” he asked.

“I had to buy her dinner.”

“That sounds like you set up a bet where you win either way.”

Jason grinned, pushed himself off the wall and slapped Humphrey on the shoulder.

“And your mum thought you’d never get your head around politics. I’m going to go wait for Farrah to turn up. She should be getting portalled in any minute.”

Humphrey watched Jason drop into his shadow like it was a hole in the floor and vanish. He then looked again at the door through which Allayeth had left.

“Maybe Rick has a point.”