

Chapter 279

Time to Rip Off the Band-Aid

“So, that’s the long and the short of it,” Jason said. “The EOA buy you out. Generously. I know it’s heavy-handed of me to take control of your affairs like this, but this is the only safe way out. It also means I can avoid killing a bunch of people.”

Jason and Hiro were in Hiro’s sprawling apartment. After Jason explained the arrangements he had made, Hiro spent a long time processing it in silence. Jason waited patiently.

“You’ve learned more about the EOA than before, haven’t you?” Hiro finally said.

“Yes,” Jason answered. “They aren’t something that Victor Tollman can resist. He just doesn’t have the tools. Unless people like Vermillion and myself chose to step in, and it would take more than just us.”

“At which point it wouldn’t be a matter of stopping someone from taking over but choosing who does,” Hiro reasoned.

“Yes. In any case, neither Vermillion nor I will be lending our assistance, let alone anyone else.”

Hiro absently rubbed a hand over his mouth as he continued to think things through.

“Did you ever happen to find out what EOA stands for?” Hiro asked.

“Engineers of Ascension,” Jason said.

“Sounds like a cult.”

“Not quite, but I sense a little bit of cult flavour,” Jason said. “I’ve had some experience with cults.”

“You’ve had experience with cults?”

“A couple,” Jason said. “One was the kind who live out in the desert and eat people. The other was more about your classic religious extremism.”

“Terrorists?”

“Basically, yeah.”

“I have to admit, I’m really curious about your time away,” Hiro said. “How did you get those scars, for example?”

Jason had two visible scars on his face, where fragments of star seed had pushed their way out of his body. The marks that experience left on his soul were now scars on his body. Mostly it was his chest, but he had a small scar on the side of his chin where his beard no longer grew in and one that bifurcated one eyebrow. They weren’t glaring blemishes, but they weren’t hidden, either.

"There was a local crime lord," Jason said.

"You told me you had a run in with someone like that."

"I did something he didn't like, so he had me kidnapped and handed over to someone rather unusual, knowing he would do worse to me than anything the crime lord could dream up."

"Were you...?"

"Tortured," Jason said. "To be honest, I was unconscious for most of it."

"Those aren't your only scars," Hiro realised.

"There might be one or two more. I got lucky, though. The bad guys had some kind of falling out. One of their henchmen did a runner and they were afraid he was going to tell people where I was."

"And they were right?"

"Yeah. Turns out the henchman tried to kill me once, but I let him live. He was apparently a live by a code type. So, while the bad guys were getting into it over what to do, I had a chance to get free."

"What happened to them?"

"I caught the crime lord and he caught the bad end of the barbaric local legal system. The torture guy got away, but he was way too big a deal for me to handle anyway. I did manage to scuttle some very big plans of his, later. A lot of his time, resources and people went down the drain. I still couldn't touch him, but I managed to hurt him some. It's a better chance than most get."

"I knew you'd been through some things," Hiro said.

"I'm looking forward to telling you more," Jason said. "Once you're out of the EOA's path, I'll be more comfortable about sharing some secrets. You aren't going to fight me on this deal, are you, Uncle?"

"No," Hiro said wearily. "Honestly, it's a relief. I've felt the changes coming for a while; I knew something was different about it. It feels like the pressure is constantly building and I'd like to get out before something blows up."

"I'm glad you feel that way," Jason said. "I'm just one man and I don't think I can protect you against a whole organisation. Even if I hadn't made this deal, I'd be stuck with the choice of leaving you defenceless or bringing even more of them down on you as they try to deal with me. I'm glad that Vermillion was there to broker it, because I'm still all sharp edges after too much fighting. Left to my own devices, I would have made things worse."

"I feel bad not standing by Victor, though," Hiro said. "He's been good to me."

“Vermillion and I are going to talk to Victor,” Jason said. “We won’t support him in resisting the inevitable, but we’ll back him up if we can convince him to facilitate a smooth transition. With us standing behind him, he can do very well out of this. As will you.”

“You’ll have a lot of capital and a lot of business experience,” Jason said. “I’m sure you’ll land on your feet. I’m hoping you’ll come up the coast with me. The family will be happy to have you out of your sordid life of hookers and blow.”

“Your entire understanding of crime comes from eighties action movies, doesn’t it?” Hiro chuckled.

“I’m learning,” Jason said defensively. “Just today I discovered that not all gang-bangers are white guys in torn leather vests.”

“I’ve actually been thinking about packing it all in for while,” Hiro said. “Heading up the coast, buying up some land and opening a resort. I know good contractors and how to wrangle a land deal. I have some connections that could really help me out. It’s an idea I’ve been playing with, ever since things started getting weird.”

“That’s a good plan,” Jason said.

“I don’t want to leave without settling things properly with Vincent, though,” Hiro said. “It feels like running away. I want to go with you, when you meet with him.”

Jason thought it over for a moment.

“Alright,” he said.

Vermillion was wearing a blousy black shirt and painted-on jeans as he stumbled out of the backroom of a basement club he owned, with two pretty young women and one pretty young man. He made sure that they had biscuits and juice before arranging them all rides home. His aftercare was quite similar to the Red Cross following a blood donation. He was changing into clothes that he was willing to be seen in out on the street when something unusual appeared in front of him.

➤ You have received a voice chat request from [Jason Asano]. Accept Y/N?

He glanced over at his phone, sitting on a dresser.

“That’s highly unusual. Er... accept?”

“Craig,” Jason’s voice came into his head. Vermillion had experienced telepathy before, although this was the first time it came with an operating system.

“Jason?”

“G’day. I’m going to bring my uncle along when we go see Victor, so can you swing by his place so we can all go together?”

“I know where it is,” Vermillion said. “That’s a good idea. Victor respects Hiro’s opinion, and knowing that Hiro has taken the out will make it easier for Victor to do the same.”

“Unless it backfires and Victor sees Hiro as a traitor,” Jason said, playing devil’s advocate.

“It’s worth the risk,” Vermillion said. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Vermillion was back in tall, dark and mysterious mode when he arrived on Hiro’s balcony by means unknown. He was wearing a dark suit, his hair expertly groomed. Taika and Hiro did not notice his arrival until Jason opened the balcony door.

“Do you need an invitation, out of curiosity?” Jason asked.

“Only as a matter of manners.”

“Then, by all means, come in.”

Hiro and Taika were nervous, but Vermillion’s aura was toned down from the aggressive and intimidating norm he employed against his criminal associates. Both of the normal men had an expression of waiting for the other shoe to drop.

“Shall we?” Jason asked, gesturing at the elevator. As they rode down, Taika kept glancing at Vermillion.

“How’d you get up on that balcony, bro?”

“Taika!” Hiro scolded.

“No, I’ve got ask, boss. There’s some spooky stuff going on lately and I’m not sure I can protect you properly.”

“I respect your work ethic,” Vermillion complimented, “but a man in my position keeps his capabilities as secret as he can.”

Jason silently nodded his agreement. He had been very careful about using his portal arch because it was a powerful trump card, especially if no one knew that he had it. After testing to make sure it wasn’t impaired by the weak local magic, he had refrained from using it again, relying on Shade for transport.

Taika took the wheel of Hiro’s large town car, with Hiro next to him in the passenger seat. That left their backs to Vermillion in the rear with Jason. Although Vermillion’s aura was subdued, out of courtesy to Jason, he still maintained a certain level of unnerving pressure. He had an image to uphold, after all.

“Could we swap some aura manipulation tips later?” Jason asked quietly. He modulated his voice low enough that only enhanced senses would make it out clearly. “I’m pretty good at using my aura as a weapon, but I don’t have a lot of practice using it on regular people, so it’s bit of a blunt instrument. I appreciate the nuance of your fine control in projecting on normals.”

“I’d like that. I’d love to pick up some of your high-end control. It’s like an iron sphere.”

“Sounds good.”

“I have a club full of blood groupies who get off on aura manipulation. You’ll get all the practice you can handle.”

“Are they a bunch of emo kids?”

“Some,” Vermillion admitted. “There are all manner of thrill-seekers in my circle, though. Hedonism comes in many flavours.”

Hiro and Taika rode in silence, the unintelligible murmurings in the back making them all the more nervous. Then the murmuring stopped as Jason spoke out loud.

“What are those auras?” Jason asked. “I don’t recognise them.”

“What?” Takia asked.

“Just be ready to drive,” Jason told him.

“I am driving, bro.”

“I mean really drive.”

“What was that about auras?” Taika asked. “Are there crystal therapists coming after us?”

Vermillion let out a dark chuckle that chilled Hiro and Taika to the bone.

“You were going to tell them after the EOA deal was done, right?” he asked.

“Yeah, but I think it’s time to rip off the band-aid,” Jason said. “There’s at least two dozen of them, so I don’t think holding back will be an option.”

“Twenty-nine, by my count.”

“Twenty-nine what?” Hiro asked.

“Blood servants,” Vermillion explained. “People who have drank the blood of a vampire without going through the turning process.”

“Did you just say vampire?” Hiro asked.

“I don’t know about vampires or whatever,” Taika said as the car sped up, “but there’s a bunch of bikers riding up on us.”

In the thick traffic, it had taken Taika a while to notice the bikers converging on them. Although he had sensed their auras for a while, Vermillion now turned to look through the window.

“The Blood Riders,” he said. “They’re a motorcycle gang entirely turned into blood servants. My people forced the ones behind it to cut the bikers off. It seems that someone is trying to get some final work out of them before the strength leaves them.”

“Does that help us?” Jason asked.

“No,” Vermillion said. “Vampire blood is addictive, which is how vampires control their servants. Most likely, they were told that if they deal with us, their supply gets restored. They were probably told to be discrete, but blood servants get very focused when their supply is on the line. Once the effects start wearing off, they become aggressive and unstable.”

“Not so good at following directions,” Jason said.

“Exactly,” Vermillion said. “I’d bet that whoever sent them hasn’t dealt with desperate blood servants before. They’re nice and obedient while the blood keeps coming, but they get very real stroppy when it stops. Otherwise, they’d never come at us like this, in the open. The network is not going to be happy with this, however it plays out.”

“Ah, Jason,” Taika said. “There’s two more bikes.”

“More bikers?” Vermillion asked

“No, bro,” Taika said, sounding off-kilter as he watched the mirrors. “These look like your bike. The riders all look like they’re wearing a big, black coat or something.”

“Ah, my ride is here,” Jason said, then let out a gleeful laugh. “This is going to be wild.”

“Your ride?” Hiro asked, then goggled as Jason was shrouded in dark mist. At the same time, bullets started hitting the car.