

Chapter 278

Underworld Bargain

"I don't recognise the auras," Jason said.

"Engineers of Ascension," Vermillion said. "Their alchemically-enhanced foot soldiers. This may not go well."

"I can live with that," Jason said. "Sooner or later, I'll have to make an example of someone."

"It isn't prison rules, Mr Asano."

"Maybe not to you," Jason said. "I'm all alone and surrounded by dangerous people who, as it turns out, are already in gangs."

Vermillion frowned.

"Will you at least allow me to try and de-escalate the situation?"

"This is your establishment and I'm your guest," Jason said. "I'll defer to you."

"Thank you."

Jason sat down again, his back to the door as he watched casually out the window and poured himself another glass of wine. Vermillion pulled out his phone.

"Anika, some people are about to come in. Please direct them upstairs immediately and try not to disturb the customers. Thank you."

Shortly thereafter, a dozen men came up the stairs. They each had the swollen musculature and vacant stare of a homoerotic action figure. Each was wearing a tight, white t-shirt and dark green cargo pants. They looked like someone was cloning thugs and selling them in job lots.

Only one the men had clear, intelligent eyes. He was just as muscular as the others, but wore a shirt and slacks, with leather shoes instead of sneakers. He stood at the front, directing his gaze at Vermillion, who stepped forward to meet him.

"Mr Kissling," Vermillion greeted coldly.

"Mr Vermillion," Kissling responded. "We're sorry to intrude, but we need to take the man sitting behind you."

Jason didn't react, continuing to watch the street below with a glass of wine in his hand.

"We have no quarrel with the Cabal, and will be happy to compensate you and your organisation for your cooperation in this matter."

“This man is in my establishment, at my invitation, as my guest,” Vermillion said. “Your words may be polite, sir, but your actions are just the opposite. If you wish to take this man, you have to go through me.”

“You may wish to think though the ramifications of denying us, Mr Vermillion. I know that your group is remaining hands-off in regards to the activities of mine. If you stand in our way now, you are making a choice for your entire faction.”

“Am I meant to allow any trespass the EOA wishes to make because they claim it involves larger political forces? That is a cheap tactic, Mr Kissling.”

“It is no cheap tactic, Mr Vermillion. Your Cabal has sensibly chosen to step aside as we pursue our interests, but this man has not. He is a legitimate obstacle to our intentions.”

“I think, Mr Kissling, that you are labouring under a misconception. I was present when Victor Tollman asked Mr Asano for his assistance in resisting your encroachment. Mr Asano flatly declined.”

“The fact remains that his uncle is a part of the regime we are going to displace. Will he standby when we come for his uncle?”

“Perhaps rather than take actions we all come to regret,” Vermillion suggested, “we can sit down and discuss a compromise.”

Kissling rubbed his chin as he considered it, his henchman army lined up behind him like soldiers in a row.

“It can’t hurt to at least talk,” he said. Vermillion nodded gratefully, leading Kissling over to the table, where they sat down to join Jason. Jason didn’t react, continuing to look out the window, sipping at his wine.

“Good day, Mr Asano,” Kissling said. “We have no more quarrel with you than with Mr Vermillion or his people. The crux of the matter is whether you will interfere with our interests. If I can’t get assurances from you, then I am going to have to disappoint Mr Vermillion and become more direct.”

Jason turned to face Kissling. Jason’s aura remained undetectable but his eyes were cold as they looked over Kissling like he was a slab of meat in a butcher shop.

“Mr Vermillion said that you were labouring under a misconception,” Jason said lightly. “In actuality, you are labouring under two.”

“And what is the second one?” Kissling asked.

“That he is protecting me from you. He is, in fact, protecting you from me.”

Vermillion winced.

“I could warn you about what would happen if you and your people took action against me or my uncle,” Jason said, “but I realise that until someone is foolish enough to try, people aren’t going to take me seriously.”

“Do you really expect to intimidate me?” Kissling asked.

Jason let out a weary sigh.

“I see you’re one of those people who don’t listen so much as wait for their turn to talk,” he said sadly. “When I came home, I wasn’t looking to go murdering anyone. I wanted things to be simple. I never want to kill people but in the end, the result is always killing and killing and killing. I think, at this point, I just have to accept that it’s inevitable. If it’s not you, it’ll be someone else.”

“I think we can try and find a middle ground,” Vermillion interjected. “Mr Kissling, your people are going to move in and take control of the local criminal element. I think we can all agree that this is an inevitable outcome. You, Mr Asano, want your uncle, and presumably his people, to be safe. Would you both consider that an accurate description of our current circumstances?”

“Yes,” Kissling said and Jason nodded.

“Good,” Vermillion said. “Then here is what I propose. The EOA will buy out Hiro Asano’s interests in the city, for extremely generous compensation. Any of Hiro Asano’s people will be free to leave unmolested or transition into the new administration as they choose. The Cabal will vouchsafe Hiro and his people from reprisals from Victor Tollman and his organisation or the Engineers of Ascension. This will remove any reason for you, Mr Asano, from intervening in Engineer of Ascension affairs. What do we think about that?”

“A chance for my uncle to go completely legitimate and come back to the family,” Jason mused, nodding thoughtfully to himself. “I like it.”

“I would need to have a better definition of Hiro Asano’s people,” Kissling said. “You could interpret that as the entire organisation he works for. Then, moving in at all would constitute breaking the deal and the Cabal is well within their rights to intervene under the guise of protection.”

“It will count Hiro himself and anyone who works for him personally,” Vermillion said. “It would include direct subordinates and low level staff in his legitimate business interests, that your people, Mr Kissling, would be assuming control of.”

“And your uncle will go quietly?” Kissling asked Jason.

“He already knows that things are changing in ways he doesn’t understand,” Jason said. “I’ll make sure he goes along. That does not mean he’ll turn on his previous affiliation, however. He won’t help you against Tollman’s organisation.”

“We don’t need his help,” Kissling said. “We just need people like you to stay out of our way.”

“Deal,” Jason said, offering his hand over the table. Kissling shook it.

-
- [Michael Kissling](#)
 - [Elite Converted \(bronze-rank\)](#)
-

Jason schooled his face to not let the surprise show, but he spotted that Vermillion had noticed something. Kissling was nothing like the converted Jason had encountered in the astral space, at least to his magical senses. Kissling’s followers had the familiar, automaton-like presence, but they were of an entirely different nature, magically speaking.

These were clearly altered through methodology wholly unlike the modified clockwork cores the Builder cult employed. It would appear that the Engineers of Ascension had developed some alternate means to affect people in a similar way. As to how harmful that process was and if people were volunteering he would have to look into later. At the very least, Kissling seemed to have gone through the process with his mind intact.

After the deal was struck, Kissling turned to Vermillion.

“Will your organisation stand as guarantor for this compact?”

“It will,” Vermillion said. “We will take on the protection of Hiro Asano and his people, as well as enforce the other stipulations, should either party choose to contravene this agreement.”

“Very well,” Kissling said, standing up. “I’m glad we didn’t have to go through any unpleasantness.”

Vermillion and Jason also got to their feet.

“I would not consider your marching a small army of your drones through one of my places of business to be without unpleasantness,” Vermillion said. “Although you avoided anything drastic, do not expect this to go answered.”

Kissling frowned, but nodded his acknowledgement. He led his people downstairs and away, while Jason and Vermillion watched through the window.

“How long were you in action?” Vermillion asked.

“In action?” Jason asked.

“I’ve fought three wars,” Vermillion said. “One as a human, one otherwise and one half and half. I know what a man fresh from a life of constant battle looks like.”

“Half a year,” Jason said softly.

“Did you win?”

“Yeah. I had to die to get there, but we won.”

“You died?”

“I’m trying to give it up,” Jason said. “I’m worried that dying is becoming habit forming.”

“Habit forming?”

“Yeah,” Jason said. “Coming back from the dead is kind of my thing.”

“You are an odd man, Jason Asano.”

“You’re a vampire,” Jason said.

“It’s a good time to be a vampire,” Vermillion said. “Anne Rice, Twilight. Bram Stoker was a debacle for us, and the less said about Bela Lugosi the better.”

“Really? Twilight?”

“Twilight was fantastic for us.”

They watched Kissling and his people climb into a series of SUVs and drive off.

“So who do you think sent Kissling our way?” Jason asked. “Why did he approach here instead of the townhouse where I’m staying?”

“My guess would be that they were operating on very limited information.”

“The obvious culprit is our friend Victor,” Jason said. “If he can provoke the EOA into attacking you and me together, it draws two reluctant but powerful allies to his side.”

“Possibly,” Vermillion said, “but perhaps not probably. Victor likes to amplify his larrikin persona to make others underestimate him, but he is, in reality, both careful and deliberate. Setting the EOA on us would be a desperate gamble that could easily alienate the very people he’s trying to ally with. Desperate gambles aren’t the way he does things.”

“Maybe he’s desperate enough,” Jason said.

“I still think not,” Vermillion said. “Kissling won’t be a big shot in the EOA. If he wasn’t hungry to prove himself, he never would have risked this blowing up in his face. Whoever put him onto us most likely knew this and Victor lacks the knowledge of EOA members.”

“Then who?” Jason asked. “You think the Network has found out about a rogue new magician?”

“No,” Vermillion said. “That would be Annabeth Tilden’s call and she definitely isn’t stupid enough to provoke the Cabal like that.”

“Then who is?”

“Only low-level idiots with ambitions above their station, like Kissling. No, I think that whoever sent Kissling our way doesn’t fear the Cabal because they’re part of it.”

“Internal strife?”

“The Cabal is like an old, aristocratic family,” Vermillion said. “To outsiders, we present a united front. Within, however, is turmoil, ambition and backstabbing. We’re the most fractious of the three major factions because we have history enough that some internal squabbling always takes place within a broader context.”

“So, you think this wasn’t really about me,” Jason said. “You think it’s about you.”

“Most likely,” Vermillion said. “I’m afraid some of my fellows are eyeing you off as an opportunity to advance at my expense.”

Two vampires met in a booth, in an upscale basement bar with old wood and dark lighting.

“Kissling was a disappointment,” one of them said. His clothes were as sleek as his youthful features and slick, dark hair.

“It was always less likely to work than not,” the other said. He looked to be a well-preserved middle age, with distinguished salt and pepper hair and a grey suit that complimented without being ostentatious. “I’m surprised Kissling even tried at all.”

“So what now?” the younger one asked. “Do we just let it go?”

“Of course not. If that essence magician really is an independent operator, that means there’s a source for new magic outside of Network channels. I’m not willing to let Vermillion take all the credit for bringing that into the Cabal.”

“Then what?”

“I think we need to see what this essence magician is capable of,” the older one said. “Let’s throw something at him and see how he handles it.”

“Like what?”

“The Blood Riders.”

The younger vampire looked askance at the elder.

“I think that is a very bad idea,” he said.

“The Blood Riders are being left to rot,” the older vampire said. “It doesn’t matter what happens to them.”

“My concern isn’t what happens to them,” the younger vampire said. “My concern is what they’ll do. They must be desperate after being cut off from their blood supply.”

“Which is why they’ll do what they’re told, if they think there’s a fresh supply on offer.”

“I don’t think they’re stable,” the younger one said. “Using them is courting disaster.”

Calmly and smoothly, so as not to alarm with sudden movement, the older one drew a pistol and shot the younger in the head.

“I just knew you’d be a tattletale.”

He put two bullets in the heart and two more in the head.

“That should hold you until I can find a saw.”