

Chapter 280

Bullets, Bikes and Blood

Hiro flinched as a bullet shattered the back window of the car.

"Is anyone hit?" he asked, ducking down as he turned to check on Jason and Vermillion in the back. Vermillion was rubbing the back of his head, looking disgruntled. In spite of the sudden chaos, Hiro was startled to see a figure draped in shadow where his nephew had been.

"Taika," Jason's voice came from the impenetrable darkness of the hood. "Keep driving and I'll do my best to keep them off you. Hiro, call the police."

"You seriously think the police can help?" Hiro asked incredulously.

"No, but a bunch of bikies attacked your car. You don't want to be the guy who didn't call the police."

"What do you mean, keep them off you?" Taika asked wildly.

The traffic along the multi-lane toll road had turned into chaos as the gunfire erupted from the bikers pulling out pistols and even sawn-off shotguns. Accidents were taking place already as cars swerved into one another in the mad panic to accelerate away. Some even wiped out the bikers that were the source of the chaos.

More bullets struck Hiro's car. Hiro hunkered down but that wasn't an option for the hefty Taika. Vermillion shifted position to shield the big man from the shots coming from behind. He winced when struck by gunfire, but while the non-magical bullets dug into his flesh, they were stopped dead by the strength of his bones. His vampiric regeneration pushed the bullets back out quickly, in any case.

Fortunately, firing a gun from a moving bike at a moving vehicle was not a recipe for pinpoint accuracy and more bullets hit random vehicles or nothing at all than Hiro's car. Even so, the sheer number of bikers firing off shots meant that both Vermillion and Jason were struck multiple times. Jason's cloak, however, shot out tendrils of shadow-stuff that intercepted the bullets, stopping them dead.

"Good thing they don't have magic bullets," Vermillion said.

"You can get magic bullets?" Jason asked.

"The Network can make them. I'm not sure how."

"Small mercies, then," Jason said. "I'm more curious about where they got that many hand guns. This is Australia."

"Left over from the smuggling ring that was shut down a few years back," Vermillion said. "They were having them sent from Austria to Sydney through the mail."

“How do you get hand guns through the mail?”

“I remember that,” Hiro said. He had pushed his seat right back and was doing his best to squeeze himself under the dash to make as small a profile as possible. “Victor rose up not long after that, after the cops busted the whole thing open. People appreciated someone who could keep a lid on things.”

The two big, black motorcycles and their shadowy riders pulled up on either side of Hiro’s car.

“Are you sure they’re with you, bro?” Taika asked nervously.

“Yep. I’m going to go do something about these bikies. Uncle Hiro, get right down.”

“Way ahead of you,” Hiro said in a voice shot with adrenaline and fear.

Two shadowy shapes moved away from Taika and Hiro as the bodies Shade had hidden in their shadows returned to Jason. Jason opened the door of the moving car and the two bodies slipped out to take the form of a third bike and shadowy rider, already on the move. That made three sleek, black motorcycles racing alongside the rapidly accelerating car.

Now six of Shade’s bodies were either bikes or riders, with the last being Jason’s own shadow. It rose up and engulfed him, Jason immediately emerging from one of the dark riders on the back of a bike. The rider diminished to form Jason’s new shadow as Jason took its place on the back of the bike. Under Shade’s control, the bike didn’t so much as waver during the process. Racing on the back of Shade’s motorcycle form, Jason’s cloak lit up with stars as it flared out behind him like the tail of a comet.

Jason had been a decent rider, once upon a time. As a boy, he had spent a lot of time riding on the farm of an uncle on his mother’s side. It had been a number of years since then and those were dirt dikes, as opposed to the powerful, oversized street bike form that Shade had assumed.

Riding on asphalt was easier than the rough dirt trails and loose sand he had experience with, but the wild traffic and gun-toting bikers were an exciting new hazard. Jason left the control mostly to Shade, broadly guiding his familiar by shifting his weight and leaving his hands free.

Two bikers rode up on either side of Jason, firing pistols. Despite the cloak largely trailing behind him, it still shot out tendrils to intercept bullets from all angles. The bikers were ostensibly out of reach, but Jason extended his shadow arms in each direction, grabbing the handlebars of each bike. He yanked them hard to the side, causing the front wheels of both to turn sharply. At speed, this cause both to flip immediately and Shade deftly slalomed between the tumbling bikes before swerving in the direction of more bikers.

Jason had used his clothes-changing ability to slip on his combat robes while he had still been in the car. Unlike scholarly robes, these were designed for combat, so while they were loose fitting, it was not so much they got tangled up in the wheels. The outfit custom-designed for him by Gilbert were sheaths across the chest for his throwing darts. They were incorporated directly into the custom armour, eschewing the need for the bandoleer he had used at iron rank.

Taking a dart marked with a green cord, he threw it into the wheel of an approaching motorcycle, which was immediately tangled in conjured vines, flipping over violently. Using a shadow arm, he jammed a red-tagged dart into the fuel tank of another bike, which exploded impressively.

Their auras told Jason that the bikies were at the low end of bronze, so they would likely survive a motorcycle crash. A motorcycle explosion, maybe not. He had not returned to his home world the same as he left and had no qualms about killing these men. If someone came after him, that was the life of an interdimensional man of mystery. Endangering others to get to him, though, was where he drew the line.

The traffic had started to clear, as accidents caused obstructions and lucky drivers managed to escape down exits from the toll road. As a results, the remaining cars were clear to accelerate to even more dangerous speeds, only to catch up with the traffic ahead, triggering a fresh round of chaos.

Jason's shadow again rose up into the form of a shadow rider and Jason vanished into it, emerging from another, bringing him closer to more bikers. He reached out with a shadow arm and punched a biker in the face before snatching his sawn-off shotgun. The disrupted bike crashed while Jason moved the shotgun into a firing grip in his hand.

He hadn't fired a shotgun since he was a teenager, again on his uncle's farm, but the cut-down double barrel wasn't a complicated weapon. Using Shade's superior mobility and control, he positioned himself to fire into the front wheel of one bokie then another, causing a pair of crashed before stowing the shotgun in his inventory.

After that, Jason started testing his abilities. He started with blood magic, which he knew to be effective at least against lesser vampires. He reasoned that blood servants should, if anything, have even less resistance.

"Bleed for me."

Jason's guess was borne out as a bokie started convulsing, blood spraying from his mouth and nose. He lost control of his speeding bike, which toppled over into a crash. For the next, Jason tried a different spell.

"Feed me your sins."

Jason was unsure if the vampire blood in the blood servants would count as an affliction, but suspected it might given Vermillion's description of the side effects. This proved to be the case as the biker's life force started bright red, with a dark red taint that was almost back that drained out and over into Jason's outstretched hand. Jason sensed the biker's aura drop from the low end of bronze, though iron and down to normal as it did.

The holy afflictions Jason's power left behind started inflicting transcendent damage with Jason's bronze-rank power on the suddenly normal-rank enemy. The biker's body lit up like a thermite reaction, cutting a trail of blinding light as his bike continued forward until it toppled over.

Jason didn't restrict himself to stealing guns and flinging spells. With a biker coming up behind him, Jason activated the gliding power of his cloak, the momentum lifting him up into the air off his bike. His own bike raced ahead as the biker appeared under him and Jason extended his shadow arms down to grab the handlebars, pulling himself down to land on the seat, behind the startled biker. He shoved the biker off and assumed control of the motorcycle.

Jason laughed like a madman, almost surprised the outlandish manoeuvre had worked. His bronze-ranked attributes had made it possible, the spatial awareness of his spirit and the agility of his speed attribute combining to superhuman effect. Momentarily clear of other bikers, he glanced forward to see how well he had distracted the bikers from his uncle's car. Most of them were now focused on him, although some were still in pursuit of the car.

Through the back window, he could see Vermillion, still body-blocking bullets for Taika in the driver's seat. Jason watched as a biker drew close to the rear of the car, at which point Jason sensed threads of magic emerging from the window, originating at the tips of Vermillion's fingers. They were invisible to the naked eye, but the magic imbued into the silken threads was clear to Jason, although clearly not the biker. They invisibly drifted around him with no reaction before going taught, slicing through flesh like a knife through vegetables. The bloody wreck that was the biker lost control of his bike, which toppled over to gruesome effect at the speed he was going.

Jason was forced to drive the ordinary motorcycle himself, recklessly pushing toward the closest surviving biker. He jumped up, standing on the bike in a dangerous balancing act briefly before leaping to the next biker, powerfully pushing off as he used the bike as a stepping stone before landing on another of Shade's bike forms. The disrupted biker wobbled dangerously and Jason swerved in to finish the job with a backhand to the face. The biker lost control and crashed, Shade expertly avoiding being caught up in it.

“We’re about to have eyes on us,” Shade warned from Jason’s shadow. Jason looked up to spot an approaching white helicopter bearing a news network logo.

“I guess I should tone down the magic,” Jason said, dimming his cloak down to black.

Annabeth Tilden was eating lunch and playing go with her wife in the comfortable private lounge in the rear of her wife’s art gallery when her phone rang. They looked at the phone on the coffee table and saw it was the office.

“At least it isn’t two in the morning, this time,” Susan said.

“Keti, what is it?” Annabeth answered, her eyes going wide at the response. “What channel?”

She turned on the television. Soon she was watching coverage of a wild, running battle between motorcyclists on a Sydney toll road.

There was a swath of leather clad bikers on low-slung chopper-style motorcycles, many of whom were firing hand guns. Most eye catching was a man in black whose hooded cloak trailed through the air behind him, in constant threat of being dragged into the back wheel of his huge, black street cycle. There were flashes of gunfire, none of which phased the dark figure, as he rapidly dispatched the bikers by means hard to make out. The news camera seemed to have a hard time keeping the man in focus, but every time he swerved into the direction of a biker, the biker crashed spectacularly.

“Dear gods,” Susan said as the footage cross cut to the trail of crashed cars and bikes left in the rolling battle’s wake.

Annabeth took a long, steeling breath, the phone still held to her head.

“I’m coming right in,” she said over the phone.

Even in a blood frenzy, the remaining bikers finally realised that their pursuit was futile. Jason likewise took off, flanked by the dark riders. He didn’t return to Hiro’s car under the gaze of the eye in the sky, instead opening up a voice chat with Vermillion.

“How are you?” Jason asked.

“These clothes are done for,” Vermillion said wearily. “The one I took to the head rang my bell pretty good. I really need someone to eat.”

“You mean something to eat,” Jason said.

“That’s what I said.”

“Can you deliver Taika and my uncle to the cops safely?” Jason asked.

“Of course,” Vermillion said. “I can liaise with the Network, who I imagine are spitting blood right now. I’ll have to face the music at some point anyway, given it was blood

servants that attacked us. They will be looking for an explanation from my organisation, since we're the ones with the blood servants."

"What will their attitude towards me be?" Jason asked.

"I have no idea," Vermillion said. "It probably depends on how much that news helicopter saw. I'll try and set up a meeting on neutral ground."

"That would be good," Jason said. "I owe you one for looking out for my uncle."

The helicopter continued to trail Jason and the dark riders until they moved under an overpass and didn't emerge out the other side.