

## smoke and mirrors to set the world aflame

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## smoke and mirrors to set the world aflame

by Anonymous

### Summary

Hostage negotiation turns into shady business deal.

Ash is drawn in by the siren call of money - and maybe something else.

### Notes

more incoherent plot and word vomit for anyone who's interested

questionable economics in this fic, not an economist here

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

“What a pretty thing you are,” says the man, hands cuffed behind his chair, cuffs linked to a pipe in the wall with a chain that rattles every time he moves.

Ash ignores the jibe and shuts the door behind him, sealing them together in the room, stone floor, stone walls, stone ceiling. The air is stagnant. Silent. A pane of silver takes up a portion of the wall

next to the room. In the light, it's a perfect mirror, a splash of red and a dash of purple breaking up the grey.

"Well damn, it was worth a try." The mutter, so low it would've been ambient noise, carries perfectly.

Ash almost laughs. Flirts, bribes, pleas, threats, nothing is new anymore.

He makes his way over to the table, languid steps light, but still all too loud. On the wood lay the two things they've taken off of the man – a pair of sunglasses, and a phone, one of those old flip-phones that belongs several decades in the past. He doesn't need to look at it to know it's a burner.

The chair scrapes as he pulls it out. Scrapes, again, as he spins it so its back faces the other man. It doesn't scrape when he settles down, straddling the seat, resting his forearms on the backrest, leaning forward.

He allows a few moments of stillness to go by as he observes the man before him, fully aware that he is being observed in return. The man doesn't seem perturbed; he's sitting with one leg thrown over the other, lounging back in the chair despite his hands being restrained.

"My men tell me you won't speak unless you're speaking to me," Ash says. "The room's soundproof, there are no microphones, cameras, or recording devices." He gestures at the window with the flap of a hand. "They won't hear a word we say, even if you scream. So let's discuss terms, hmm?"

"Pass me my shades, would you?" The man says. "Your goons weren't very kind about taking my things."

"This is a hostage situation." Ash reminds him. "Cooperate, and you'll get your things back. You'll be living your cushy rich life in no time with not a hair harmed on your head. Continue like this, and we're gonna have problems."

"See," the man tilts his head. "I'm more than happy to have this little chat, but I prefer to do it while looking my best. Shows respect, you know. Look at you, all dressed up. At the very least, I have to reciprocate."

Ash raises an eyebrow. They're both in suits. They're both 'dressed up'. Perhaps he thinks he can stall for long enough that someone comes to save him. It's not going to happen. Nobody finds Ash when he doesn't want to be found.

So he says, "I'm not looking for your respect." He rises, pushing off of the back of the chair. "Honestly, I couldn't care less, and right now, between giving you your silly sunglasses and cutting you," the knife flips into his hand, fluid silver. "I'm seriously considering the latter."

There's hesitation for a beat – a small beat that even a keen observer wouldn't have noticed, but Ash is no simple keen observer. Then the man's laughing, throwing his head back with his neck fully exposed. "Cut me," he says. "And you'll be cutting money out of your ransom fee." When he subsides, there's a glint in his eye. "Nice bluff, though. Almost believed it." Mocking.

Ash bares his teeth. Half a smile, tight.

This is interesting. His behaviour seems similar to several patterns Ash has seen before, but there's a different tang to it, something sharp, something that reeks of blood. It makes him wonder if that tiny moment of hesitation had been intentionally shown just to throw him off, a little vulnerability to mask a hidden blade.

He roams over to the table where he spins the knife through his fingers, tosses it, snatches it out of the air. Sets it down next to the other objects.

“C’mon, they’re regular shades,” the man says, a touch of disappointment in his voice. “Your goons checked them. You can check them again if you want. Once I have them on, we talk – simple as that.”

Ash closes his eyes. Inhales, feels his chest rise, and exhales, feels his chest fall.

He picks up the shades and turns them over. Sure enough, they’re just regular shades, black frame, darkened glass. No tracking devices or recorders. Not that it matters; the room is secure from all outgoing and incoming signals, several layers of reinforced concrete with jammers and other interference generators embedded in steel.

He tosses the shades into the man’s lap.

A cough. “Do you mind?” A rattle of chains.

Ash sighs, rolls his eyes, and stalks over, carefully keeping out of the radius of being potentially kicked. To his credit, the man doesn’t try to pull anything and simply sits and waits patiently, the corner of his mouth quirked upward. The smirk turns into a grimace when Ash plucks up the shades, unfolds them, and smacks them into the man’s face until they hang there, lopsided.

“You could stand to be gentler,” the man complains.

“You could stand to be less of a dick,” Ash snaps, folding his arms as he steps back. “But I guess we’ll have to live with the fact that we can’t always get what we want.” He sneers. “Is your highness satisfied?”

“Very,” the man says. “Couldn’t be more satisfied if I tried.” Then he takes a whole minute turning his head this way and that to manoeuvre the shades to their proper place and Ash seriously considers if the potential money is worth the amount of white hairs he’ll get from dealing with this guy.

“You are exceptionally vain,” he spits instead of taking up the knife and following through with his earlier threat.

“It’s all about the branding, baby!” The man shakes his head one more time, finally finishing, and flashes Ash a winning smile. He probably winked too, but his eyes are hidden now.

“That’s enough,” Ash growls. “I need names. A negotiator, at the very least.”

“Wow, this isn’t very well thought out.”

“We like to play a game,” Ash says, and drops into his seat sideways, coiling himself around the backrest to face the man. He drums his fingers along the slats. “See if the hostage cracks before their people start offering money for their return.” He allows a small cackle through, static rippling through the air. “And if people don’t notice, then soon enough, there won’t be anything left to return.”

Sure, they did go after specific targets occasionally, but nabbing someone who looked rich was still often lucrative. Made them harder to track down, harder to discern a motive for.

“Ruthless,” the man breathes- in fear? In awe?

“It’s business,” Ash says, simply. “What’ll it be for you?”

And the man smiles. Laughs. It starts out as a small snort, then giggles, then full blown laughter devouring the choked space.

“You’re as amazing as they say,” the man finally breaks through, and it’s dark, darkness dripping down the syllables of his words, pulsing with *something*. “We’re in the middle of nowhere, in a dead zone, jammers and interference all up, are we?”

Ash says nothing, though his fingers still in his drumming, pressing against the smooth wood.

“Ashswag,” the man says slowly, drawing the name out, rolling the sounds over his tongue. “Bandit king. Phantom thief. Man of a hundred faces and none at all, always slipping away no matter the trap. Hundreds of millions on your head from both the law and the underworld. Pulled off a heist last year at what the world knew as the impossible vault.” Chains clink as he shifts, leaning forward, tone diving toward a deep rumble. “I’m a big fan.”

“So you’ve done a bit of research,” Ash remarks. One twitch of a hand can bring all his men into the room, to aid him, to end it all, but he doesn’t move. He’s intrigued. A little bit excited, a little bit wary, a little bit ready to see which direction this all will tumble downhill into a disastrous landslide.

“I like to know what I’m getting myself into.” The man smirks. “Ash, I have a proposal for you.”

“If it involves a lot of money,” Ash says, “I’m listening.”

“Oh, it does. A *lot* of money. I’m aware what you’re interested in.”

“We agree with each other. Wonderful. Let’s hope your negotiator feels the same way.”

“He does.” The man casually leans to the side. “Because he’s me. I’m here as hostage and negotiator today.”

Ash narrows his eyes.

“Before we get ahead of ourselves, allow me to introduce myself.” Perhaps he would’ve stood up and bowed, all prim and proper, sharp in that deadly suit of his, but he’s tied down, yet he still manages to convey the same energy through a simple head nod with a sliver of eyes peeking over the top of his shades. “I’m Reddoons – Red, if you will. CEO of this little startup you may know of called Myocardius. We make things.”

Ash nearly chokes on air. ‘A little startup you may know of’ and ‘we make things’ are *massive* understatements; Myocardius is one of the titans of its industry, near monopolising several of the goods it produces, having squeezed out many of its competitors in the past. If Red is telling the truth then Ash has struck literal gold with this kidnapping, but there are things that don’t add up – through his agents he knows that the CEO has died very recently, just days ago, and that late CEO was definitely not this man.

He remembers very vaguely this name, though, but there was never anything important attached to it. No developments or achievements or conquests. His name had seemed like a name to complete a list, a background character to populate a world centred on someone else.

Red’s watching him, amused, and as if he could read Ash’s mind, he elaborates. “Our previous CEO unfortunately lost their life in an... accident. Thankfully, before they left us, they appointed me as successor with unanimous support from the board.” His smile is predatory, sharp.

“Fun story,” Ash matches him with his own. “If you think we’ll let you go to get money to pay for your own ransom, you’re sorely mistaken.” Red’s already made the mistake of showing himself to be worth more than anything Ash had imagined upon first meeting him. It must be the hubris.

“No, no, none of that,” Red says. “This is where my proposal comes in. I also have to thank you for being so quick with the kidnapping – if you’d been any later I’d be dead in a body bag at the bottom of the ocean by now.”

“You’re a strange one,” Ash tells him. He lets him talk, though, hungry for a slip of the tongue – a name, a contact, an organisation that could be contacted for maximum efficiency. Plus, the more he knows, the better he can figure out how much to demand.

“You know how it is,” Red shrugs. “Periods of transition, especially after such conditions of sudden change – you get all sorts of nuisances. Some guy really wants my position, you see. Thinks he’s more deserving of it. Calls himself a prince or something.” He scoffs. “Anyway, I’m letting him duke it out with my people. He’ll cease to be a problem soon.”

“I’m glad you find our holding cell to be comfortable for your impromptu vacation,” Ash drawls, letting the sarcasm ooze like honey.

“It’s because of the wonderful host.” Red rattles the chains behind him. “One can really afford to treat prisoners better when one’s rich, I see.” He gives Ash a look that makes Ash really want to cut him. The knife’s right there.

“Back to the proposal,” Red settles down once again, smug. “You like money. I like money. My company makes a lot of money, but it’s not making as much as it could – you’re a businessman, you understand how competition works.”

Ash has an idea where this is going, but he wants to hear Red say it.

“So, say, hypothetically, a competitor’s supply chain is disrupted. A factory goes down.” Red’s shoulders bump up, fake sympathy for a fake scenario. “They lose some things here and there, security’s bad. Supply or quality goes down, and they simply don’t produce as much. If it happens too often? Consumers lose interest, lose faith.” He pauses, lets the scene hang in the air, then slowly, deadly- “*Investors* lose faith.”

And then everything comes crashing down, no funding means no products means no company, especially when attempts to connect and advertise go sabotaged. Ash has seen this many times, *sparked* this many times, sank his fangs into the flesh of those who thought they ruled the world and savoured the gold in their blood as they came crashing down to earth. He senses the same kind of hunger from Red. It’s ironic, but grand.

“You want me to do the dirty work for you,” he says flatly, keeping the interest from his voice. “While you sit and rake in the cash.”

“You get to keep what you get your hands on,” Red offers.

Ash snorts. “I can already do that without your help.”

“Good point,” Red says. “But I can provide you with information: when deals are going down, where the biggest shipments will arrive, what the best escapes routes are.”

“Way ahead of you.”

And now it’s Red’s turn to snort, incredulous. “From *who*? You get your information days, maybe,

after decisions are made. I'll get it to you the moment things change. You'll get a head start on your plans." He lowers his voice, conspiratorial, even when there's nobody else to overhear. "I'll even actively lead marks into your traps, cover for you if I can whenever you make a mistake."

"I don't make mistakes," Ash snaps.

"You don't," Red agrees smoothly. "You can't say the same for your lackeys."

It's a good thing they can't hear from beyond the glass, Ash thinks faintly.

This *is* a good deal. He can make a lot of money if he takes it; it quickens his heart to think about it, to picture the cash in heaps and droves scattered in the network of dummy bank accounts, spun among legitimate money until not a trace is left.

Then he realises, and he doesn't like that he only just realises, and he stands. The chair screeches behind him. They've left hostage negotiations territory, and Red is picking him apart *just like that* like nothing mattered, striking all the right chords with not a worry in the world. But it's good, it's alright, because if that's how he wants to play, then fine. Ash can play along. He can coax more out of Red.

"You talk a lot for a hostage," he says, sidling up to him, hands tucked in his pockets.

"I *am* also the negotiator," Red replies. "What do you think?"

"I think," Ash towers over him, one hand braced against the wall above him, crowding him into his seat. "You're holding out on me." He grins. "Ten percent of your annual profits, annually, and I'll consider."

"Ten?" Red sputters. "You're insane!"

"I've been told. Many times."

"Two," Red says, a note of warning. "You sure you want to bargain against me?" *I'm an expert at this* runs clear beneath the question.

That's exactly what Ash wants him to think. "Oh, sure. You aren't leaving here until I say so, anyway. Humour me. Nine."

Red growls. "Three point five."

Ash blows a lock of hair out of Red's face. "Eight."

"You fucker," Red hisses. "You already have something in mind. You just want to play this out, don't you?"

"We've just met and you know me so well," Ash giggles. That's right – expertise is worth nothing here, in his domain. If Red can play his tricks, so can Ash. "Come on, then, Red. Stand and deliver."

"Five."

"So stingy," Ash pouts. "Seven point five."

"Seven." It's ground out, like stone on stone.

"Nope," Ash says, releases the chair, and spins away.

“Shit.”

Ash levels his gaze at Red. “I’m sure you know, but I must make this very clear: should I agree to this proposal you’ve set up, I expect not a single penny less than what we’ve talked about.” He leans against the table, picking up the knife and scraping a thin line into the wood. “I’ve got people who are good at this money thing, in addition to myself, and I’ve also got eyes where I shouldn’t. So I’ll know, Red. I’ll know if you try to double cross me.”

Red laughs dryly. “I wouldn’t expect anything less of the infamous Ashswag.”

“Good,” Ash says. He fully expects Red to pull something. If Red is anywhere near as greedy as he is, which he probably is, then 7.5% of profits is a lot that wouldn’t be let go of without some prying. But they get there when they get there. Red can be as careful as he wants, but Ash is faster, and he’s sure they both know a monster can’t run without a head.

“I’m impressed,” he says after a while. “You’ve gone quite far to get here, to reach me. How many times did you have to get kidnapped to run into me?” Alarmingly, Red’s opening his mouth to answer. “Don’t answer that. What the fuck.”

“Anything for you,” Red says. “You’re worth more than any investment I could ever make.”

Ash scoffs. “Pretty words, Red. You know how to talk. But I want to see—” he reaches into his inner pocket, fingers tracing metal, wood. “—how far will you go for me?” He draws, and the revolver comes out, gleaming in the light.

“I was wondering where the gun was,” Red comments, and there isn’t a single quiver in his words. Ash likes it.

He steps slow and cat-like back to the chair, idly spinning the cylinder. Clickety, clackety. Red stiffens the closer he gets. Ash flicks out the cylinder. “Let’s play a little game.”

He draws a bullet from another pocket, gold gleaming against his black gloves. He slides it into the cylinder. Clicks the cylinder in. Gives it a spin. His shadow falls over Red, blotting out the light reflecting from his shades, and he can see his eyes.

Eyes locked on to his, tracking his every move.

Ash likes it.

He hooks a finger under Red’s tie and tugs him close, loosening his collar to set the revolver in the dip below his throat.

“To our new partnership,” Ash rasps, blade dragging across rough stone.

He pulls the trigger. Click.

“Should I give it another shot?” He asks, tilting his head. Closer. He can see the flutter of lashes behind darkened glass when Red blinks.

“As you wish,” Red whispers, eyes never leaving Ash, the tremor of his speech shuddering down the barrel of the gun, ricocheting into the grip in Ash’s palm. Every breath, every beat of his heart comes through, amplified in steel.

Ash pulls the trigger again. Click.

And again.

Click.

“Three more,” Ash hums. “Keep playing?”

Red makes no move to draw back or shake his head or speak to object. He swallows, throat bobbing, and wets his lips.

Ash pulls the trigger three times in quick succession.

Click. Click. *Click.*

Ash releases him. Red slackens, slumping back into his chair with a clatter of chains.

“You’re a fool,” Ash says as he returns the revolver to his inner pocket, but his words have no bite. He unfurls his hand, and there the one bullet shines. He lets it fall to the floor. The metallic clinks that follow colour their breaths.

“So I am,” Red says with a wry twist to his lips, and there’s a little shake there. “That’s why I’m here. We make a perfect pair – one insane, one foolish.”

“Hmm,” Ash smiles.

“Now that we’ve come to an agreement,” Red says. “I can go, right?”

“And I lose my only leverage? Verbal promises mean nothing.” Ash cackles. “You’re still a hostage, Red. Business partner, but still hostage. You’ve wasted quite a bit of my time, even with your proposal. I’d like to be compensated.”

“That I can do,” Red says, and the firmness is back in his voice, remarkably fast. “Let’s hear it.”

“A nice, round price of 150 million sounds good,” Ash leans against the wall, looking down at him. “You’re a lucky man today.”

Red rolls his eyes. “200 million. Donturnt. He’ll pay.”

Ash’s eyebrows raise on their own accord, and he breaks into a startled laugh. Well, this certainly works. And after all this back and forth, he’s finally got a name, and he actually knows this one – a member of the board of directors, a strong backer to Myocardius’ activities. He knocks at the door to the room. The small window slides open. Name and fee are relayed, and receding footsteps tell him it’s getting done.

Not even five minutes later there are taps on the other side of the door.

“That was fast,” Ash says, impressed.

Red flashes him that winning smile again. “I run an efficient business.”

Ash knocks the door again, a different pattern, and it pulls open. People rush in, one unlocking the chain linking Red to the wall, another two pulling Red to his feet. The first goes to pick up Red’s phone from the table, but Red interrupts them sharply. “Wait, one last thing-“

The people tense, free hands reaching for weapons. Ash holds up a hand. They relax.

Red stares straight at Ash.

“Your number?”

Ash feels the weight of everyone’s gazes, tastes the confusion in the air. He’s startled, too, but quickly files it away in favour of indignation.

“You have some nerve,” he says, voice lowered into a threat.

“To contact you about the things we agreed on,” Red shrugs, too light to be innocent, too heavy to be accidental. He isn’t smiling but Ash knows how to read a smirk in a body. “What do you expect me to do? Email you? Message through carrier pigeon? Smoke signal?” He shakes his head, doing an over-the-top act of pondering something. “What, were you expecting something else?”

The bastard’s making him look silly in front of all his men. Feeling heat rise, Ash turns to snatch the phone from the table with a snarl, and after a power-on process that takes far too long, he punches in the number of one of his burner phones, saves it, and snaps the phone closed. The battery cap comes off easily and he shakes the battery out, clacking the cap back into place with more aggression than needed.

He closes the distance between them in two strides.

“You have some nerve,” he says again, slower, quieter, that Red’s the only one that hears him whisper. He slips the dead phone into Red’s chest pocket.

“Take him away,” he commands as he steps back. “Dump him by the river or something. He can find his own way back.”

He watches as the blindfold goes back on and Red is hustled out, vanishing around the rough corner of their hideout with only a ghost of curving lips left behind to linger on stone. Ash finally turns and runs a hand through his hair, letting out a long, heavy sigh.

What a pain.

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He gets a message that evening on the number that he’d given to only one person, on an app that’s been out of use for a decade, on a phone that’s worth more in scrap metal and plastic than a device.

*Dinner?*

## End Notes

to the people who finished reading through, i hope you enjoyed it

some notes:

- red 100% arranged the 'accident' and rigged the board support process
- myocardius comes from myocardium, the muscles of the heart. i have small brain and couldn't think of a good company name

guys guys guys there's [art](#) by the wonderful ghostpajamas

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!