

Chapter 273

Boogie Man

Taika was driving Hiro's large town car, with Hiro and Jason in the back.

"The advantage of being on the legitimate side of the business is that I can be more conspicuous about enjoying the fruits of my labour," Hiro said. "The man we're going to see doesn't live in a penthouse apartment, but don't think that means he's not influential and powerful. Especially don't make the mistake of thinking he isn't dangerous."

"I'm familiar with the ramifications of crossing powerful criminals," Jason said.

"Oh?"

"I received an unfortunate lesson," Jason said, not explaining further.

"You seem fairly comfortable with my criminal entanglements," Hiro said. "Your grandmother would be disappointed in you."

"It wouldn't exactly be out of her way," Jason said. "She always liked Kaito better."

"The same with me and Shiro," Hiro said. "He was the favourite, I was the disappointment and your father laid low in the middle. Ken didn't really grab attention until he married a white girl so young. Everyone was expecting an explosion, only to be startled at how well your mother and mine got along. No one was expecting that."

"They both wanted diligent little Japanese children," Jason said. "They got Kaito, so they were willing to put up with me."

"They care more about you than you think, Jason."

"Is that so?"

"Yes. They had many regrets after you were gone. They even softened their stance on me. Not a lot, but they'll at least talk to me. They still won't be happy to know you and I are spending time together. I never would have expected you to become entangled in this kind of life."

"Oh, I only touched on criminal affairs peripherally in the course of my other work."

"Well, don't go underestimating the man we're about to meet. His name is Ari, and while he might live in a poor suburb, he is anything but. I didn't want to involve you directly, but he insisted on meeting you first. Since he did, he must have tested the gold and found it to be what you said it was."

"You left it with him? That's more than eight hundred and fifty thousand dollars worth of gold."

"Australian market price," Hiro qualified. "You aren't going to a gold seller in the shopping centre, Jason."

“I’m aware.”

“Honestly, the fact that it is so much money is what stops him from just taking it. I suspect he wants to meet you to feel out what kind of backing you have. If he thinks you’re weak, he’ll try and rip you off and push to see if you’ve got more. Don’t show any weakness and don’t let him shake you.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry about that, Uncle Hiro.”

The expensive car looked increasingly out of place as it drove through the Western Suburbs, pulling up in front of a house obscured by large bushes rising over a high wooden fence with flaking white paint. The street was dark, the street lights somewhat dimmer than normal.

“Ari likes to let his dogs intimidate people as they come in,” Hiro warned.

Jason concentrated his aura senses, feeling nine people in the house and four dogs in the yard. He sent small, directed aura pulses at the dogs, letting them feel the strength and inherently domineering nature of it.

Taika open the gate in the fence, allowing Hiro and Jason to go through. A concrete path ran up the front yard to the door, with an overgrown lawn on one side and a chain-link enclosure on the other. Inside the enclosure was a concrete floor and long, aluminium kennel, padded heavily with old blankets. In contrast to the disregard clearly held for lawn maintenance, the enclosure and the kennel within was clean and cared for. Taika and Hiro looked warily at the four German Shepherds hunched submissively on the floor of the enclosure in a line.

“What’s up with the dogs?” Taika asked.

“I don’t know,” Hiro said with worry in his voice. “Every other time I was here they tried to claw their way through the fence to get at me.”

“Maybe they’ve gone through obedience training,” Jason said.

“Dogs have sharp instincts,” Taika said, glancing at Jason. “Something’s got them spooked.”

“I guess we go knock?” Hiro suggested. “Normally dogs barking is the doorbell.”

They went up to the door, Taika stepping forward to knock. A man opened it up, looking past them with a confused expression at the dog enclosure. Jason noticed the man was wearing socks but no shoes. Taika gave him a greeting nod.

“G’day, Petros.”

“Hello Taika,” Petros responded. He was a big man, although didn’t look so in front of the mountainous Taika. He spoke softly, with a slight Armenian accent. He turned to Hiro.

“Mr Asano,” he greeted. “This is your nephew?”

“This is Jason, yes.”

“The boss said to bring you in as soon as you arrived,” Petros said, moving deeper into the house. Hiro motioning to Jason and followed, with Taika bringing up the rear.

The exterior of the house was in desperate need of paint, which fit right in with the neighbourhood. The interior was like a different world, having clearly been gutted and rebuilt from the frame out. Past the door was a tiled entryway, where shoes were lined up on racks.

“Shoes off, please.”

Jason took his shoes off along with Taika and Hiro. He slipped them into his inventory instead of onto the racks, using Taika’s bulk to hide the action. Petros then led them deeper into the house, at which point the purpose of removing their shoes became clear. The tiles foyer gave way to a hallway with rich carpeting that would be easy to dirty and hard to clean. The walls were wood panelled, with soft sconce lighting to provide a warm environment.

Petros led them into a room large enough to occupy the bulk of the house, where Jason could see into kitchen and dining rooms, plus doors that presumably led into bedrooms. The room was a large lounge area, with a giant television, bar and multiple, luxurious couches and chairs. In the centre of the room was a large table with a sunken area with a felt surface set into it. The table cellar had an elaborate board game laid out on it, with four people sitting around playing.

Jason even recognised the game, due to an old friend from school named Greg. He had regularly roped Jason and Amy into board games that would last upwards of three, six and even eight hours. He absently wondered where Greg was now; the last he heard, Greg was studying law.

Four more men were playing a video game on the large television. Everyone on the room was a burly man, except for one of the people at the table. He was slightly older, with less of an obvious-henchman air about him. Jason picked him out as Ari.

“Hey boss,” Petros said. “Mr Asano is here.”

Jason had guessed right as the man turned to give the entrants an assessing gaze, before getting up. He was lean, around forty five, with thinning hair. He was wearing neat, comfortable pants and a simple shirt.

“Ari,” Hiro greeted neutrally.

“Hiro,” Ari said in turn, then glanced back at Petros.

“The dogs?” he asked.

“They looked scared, boss,” Petros said. “Like when Vermillion comes.”

Jason felt every aura in the room except for Ari and his own tremble on hearing the name Vermillion. Even the stalwart Taika radiated trepidation.

“Is that so?” Ari mused. Unlike Petros, there was no trace of accent, although Jason knew from Hiro that he was an old school Armenian gangster. Ari turned his gaze back to the visitors.

“My dogs aren’t scared of a lot,” he said. “They’re definitely not scared of you, Hiro. They probably should be scared of you, Taika, but they’re not.”

His gaze settled on Jason.

“There’s only one person that scares my dogs; a man I do business with from time to time. When he comes here, you don’t hear a peep out of them. They’re trained guard dogs, and trained well, but they will have no part of this man.”

“Animals have good instincts,” Jason said. Ari’s gaze remained on him and he met it with casual relaxation.

“They do,” Ari agreed. “But the thing is, this man does not just scare my dogs. He scares my people and he scares me. I feel no shame in admitting it. This man, Vermillion, is the boogie man. Isn’t that right, Hiro?”

“It is,” Hiro said. He was clearly unhappy at the turn the conversation was taking but Ari paid it no mind, keeping his gaze locked on Jason.

“Now my dogs are scared,” Ari continued, “but this man isn’t here. You are. Are you a boogie man too, Jason Asano?”

“Yes,” Jason said softly.

Ari grinned, letting out a chuckle as he turned away.

“I didn’t know what to make of it,” he said. “Hiro calls me up and says he wants to move some gold. Obviously, I want to do my due diligence and what do I find but Hiro’s dead nephew, mysteriously returned to life and wandering about with a giant gold bar. You understand why this raises a lot of questions.”

“I do,” Jason said. “but since I’m here, I’m assuming you had the gold assayed and were satisfied.”

“I did. You’re certain no one is going to come looking for it?”

“Yes. Where I got it from, it wasn’t valued very highly. That’s how I picked up so much for a relatively small cost.”

“You have more?” Ari asked.

“Yes.”

“How much?”

“Enough that I’m not willing to pull it out until I get a better deal and a good money launderer.”

Ari laughed.

“The thing about this man who scares my dogs,” Ari said, veering the conversation back to the previous topic, “is that it isn’t just my dogs that get scared. I told you this, but I don’t think you understand. This man is a predator. You can feel it in your bones, like something crawling under your skin. Being near this man is like being a mouse under the gaze of an owl.”

He once again turned to focus on Jason.

“My dogs might be scared, but is it really of you?”

Ari stepped right into Jason’s personal space, staring him in the eye.

“You don’t scare me, Jason Asano.”

Jason gave Ari a slight smile.

“Would you like me to?”

Ari took a step back and started laughing.

“Would you like me to?” he repeated back, still laughing. “You know, Hiro, you said your nephew wasn’t in the game. He’s into something, though, yes? He’s got the stuff.”

“He doesn’t like to talk about his time away,” Hiro said.

“But I do want to talk about it,” Ari said. “Are you EOA, Jason Asano?”

“If I told you no, would you believe me?” Jason asked.

“If I asked you hard enough, I’d be confident you were telling the truth,” Ari said.

“I’m hoping it doesn’t come to that,” Jason said.

“Then you will need to answer my questions,” Ari said, his mirth dropping like a mask to reveal naked threat. “You’ll need to assuage my curiosity.”

“Ari,” Hiro said. “This isn’t what we agreed.”

“We’ve got EOA pushing in and your boy turning up, all but waving a banner that reads ‘very suspicious man.’ Mr Tollman told me personally to get some answers, Hiro.”

Hiro blanched.

“I’m sorry, Jason,” Hiro said. “I know you don’t want to talk about it, but you need to answer Ari’s questions.”

There was a shift in the room. No one moved but everyone felt it as Jason slowly unleashed his aura. Normal humans couldn’t detect aura, unless it was projected in a specific way. It was a simple use of basic projection control, one of the first things Farrah had taught to him. It was a tool that essences user used to intimidate normals, which, is exactly what Jason was doing.

With the progression of his aura manipulation skills, Jason could expertly express his aura slowly and deliberately, allowing the same domineering force that intimidated the dogs to press down on the normal rank auras the men in the room didn't realise they even possessed. Only Taika and his uncle were exempted, but they couldn't miss the growing dread shown on the faces around them.

"Is this what you were talking about when you said you that man scared you?" Jason asked. He spoke quietly but his words reverberated with his aura, feeling like a shout to the beleaguered criminals. He was the smallest person in the room, yet he felt larger than Taika. Everyone in the room was transfixed by Jason's suddenly tyrannical presence.

Jason stepped into Ari's space, the way Ari had to him. His aura settled on Ari's soul like a knife at his throat.

"Is this how your boogie man makes you feel, Ari? Do you still have any questions for me?"

Ari wordlessly shook his head.

"That's what I thought. You can give my uncle the money for the gold; I'll see myself out."

Jason turned to his uncle.

"You'll probably want to chat with Ari once I'm gone," Jason said. "I'll make my own way back. Taika can give me the money later."

"You don't have a car," Hiro said.

"I'll make do," Jason said. "I'm sorry for this, Uncle. I've caused you trouble."

Jason walked out. Hiro nodded at Taika to follow but Jason was already closing the door behind him. When Taika opened it, Jason was nowhere to be seen.