

## Chapter 272

### Not the Regular Sort of Dangerous

“How’d it go?” Taika asked as he drove Jason through the city. They were in one of the cars Hiro kept in a pool for his staff, a luxurious town car Taika had picked for the roomy interior.

“There are some hoops to jump through in legally coming back from the dead,” Jason said. “That lawyer you set me up with seems to know his business.”

“Yeah, he’s good,” Taika said. “We’ve got some time before you meet your uncle for dinner. Is there anything you wanted to do?”

“I don’t suppose you know where I could get some powdered silver?”

“I know a guy.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, bro. No worries.”

“You’re not going to ask what it’s for?”

“A job like mine,” Taika said, “you learn when to ask questions and when not to.”

“You seem like a really good employee,” Jason said.

“That’s why your uncle pays me the big bucks.”

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For each of his shadow bodies subsumed into Jason, Shade could mask his summoner from one form of sensory perception. He could muffle Jason’s sound, mask his scent and even eliminate the heat radiated by his body. The only senses Shade could not mask were aura senses and direct looking at him.

While Shade couldn’t prevent direct observation, observation through a secondary medium was another matter entirely. How effective the obfuscation was depended on the medium in question. A magical telescope, for example was something that Shade could hide Jason from entirely, as if he were invisible. Non magical means, such as an ordinary telescope, Shade couldn’t block at all.

Electronic devices, like cameras, proved to be something of a middle ground. Shade could not totally remove Jason from their detection, due to the lack of magic to interfere with, but he could still interfere with the complex process of data translation involved in electronic devices. The result was Jason appearing as little more than a blur to someone watching the feed. In shadowy conditions that Jason’s magic cloak could make the most of, it was the next best thing to true invisibility.

This was not Shade's first time in a technologically advanced world and he had a solid grasp of his limitations, which he and Jason had discussed at length. One advantage Shade offered was an uncanny sense of when they were being observed. Jason's aura senses could do this for living observers, but Shade could sense any camera systems pointed in their direction.

Jason was uncertain if his personal immunity to tracking powers extended to his phone, so he decided to take precautions. After obtaining some powdered silver with surprising ease, along with a few other relatively ordinary materials, he had Taika leave him back at the townhouse until it was time for Jason to meet his uncle.

Shade had ascertained that there were no cameras, other than the one in his phone, the webcam in his new laptop and the one on the desktop computer upstairs. Jason left them all upstairs on the mezzanine while he worked on his new phone case downstairs.

Clearing a space on the polished hardwood floor, Jason made preparations for the first of several rituals. First, he took out the mana lamps he had left to charge the night before. He would need them to temporarily upgrade the anaemic ambient magic to perform even the most basic rituals.

The same lack of magic made the lamps very slow to accumulate charge, however, so he would need to work with haste. He was going to miss Clive, with his quick-fire ritual drawing and power to balance out ambient magic. He didn't activate the lamps immediately, wanting to be as ready as he could so as to not waste their limited uptime.

The ritual Jason wanted to perform required magically-charged silver power. Since he couldn't source it locally, he would need to take some ordinary powdered silver and add the magic himself. It was the kind of peripheral skill he hadn't picked up from his skill book knowledge. It was Farrah and later Clive pushing him into expanding his knowledge base that prepared him for these circumstances.

That was not to say that skill books didn't have their place. His skill book-derived knowledge of artifice would let him craft a very simple magical item using the magically-charged silver.

He started by using the engraving pen he had just purchased to carve a magical diagram onto the back of his new phone case. He had practised with it first, quickly becoming comfortable with its use. The superhuman coordination of his speed attribute and the accelerated learning speed of his spirit attribute allowed him to swiftly become comfortable with simple physical tasks.

His hand moved with confidence as he engraved the phone case. One of the advantages of skill book knowledge was that it was imprinted like a computer file, so he

could easily engrave the magical diagram from memory. Like most protection-type diagrams, it was an elaborately embellished pentagram, which made for a visually pleasing design.

He set out the other things he would need. Chalk, a bag of powdered lesser monster cores and some iron spirit coins. He wondered if there was a way to charge the lamps faster with spirit coins, which was something he would need to look at later.

Jason drew out a ritual circle on the hardwood floor with chalk, then activated the mana lamps. He used powdered monster cores to adjust to the ambient magic, which was an easy task given the magically inert conditions. It wasn't something he'd done a lot, normally relying on Clive's power to render the step unnecessary.

"Next time I get killed and sent to another universe, I'm taking Clive with me."

Jason's thoughts drifted to the other soul who had apparently arrived with him. If it really was an outworlder, Jason still had no idea how to track them down. Searching for a mysterious, naked, bald person with magic powers on the internet had brought up an unhelpful plethora of results.

Setting the mana lamps to raise the ambient magic to just the minimum level for iron-rank rituals would still only give Jason a few minutes. In that time he needed to charge the silver powder with magic using one ritual, rebalance the ambient magic with a quick second ritual, then use the magically charged silver in a third ritual. He activated the mana lamps, getting results in just a few seconds.

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- You have entered a region of normalised magic. Your recovery rates will remain at normal levels without spirit coin consumption.
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Despite the time constraint, he didn't hurry. He knew that taking the time to do it right would get better results than rushing the job.

"Slow is smooth, smooth is fast," he muttered to himself as he worked with careful deliberation.

He successfully charged the silver with magic from the spirit coins. He used a simple cleansing ritual to purge the residual magic from that first task, then performed a third ritual as the last step. His hands moved over the ritual circle like an orchestra conductor as he chanted out the ritual. When he uttered the final syllable, the magically-charged silver power became a liquid and crawled onto the phone case in the middle of the ritual circle. The liquid flowed into the engraved diagram and instantly turned solid, leaving a silver diagram set into the black case.

"I think it looks good," Jason said, picking it up and turning it over in his hand.

“It is aesthetically satisfactory,” Shade agreed.

“Of course you think so,” Jason said. “It’s mostly black.”

“If you are unhappy with my design choices, I can make some modifications to the vehicle shapes I take,” Shade said. “Gordon was watching something called ‘The Love Bug,’ on television this morning. I could probably do something like that.”

“Uh, no,” Jason said. “Consider my criticism withdrawn with apologies.”

Jason turned off the mana lamps.

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- You have entered a region of magical desolation. The levels of magical density and magical saturation are extremely low, insufficient to produce spontaneous magical manifestations.
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He returned the mana lamps to various places around the townhouse, as separate as he could make them. The further apart they were, the less they would fight over what little magic there was as they charged.

Jason then took his new case and picked up his phone.

“I have no idea if this will work,” Jason said.

“It should be sufficient to prevent non-magical tracking, along with most iron-rank tracking effects,” Shade said. “Anything more powerful will be a large enough effect to be caught up in your personal immunity.”

“Magical tracking,” Jason said. “Am I reading too much into what uncle Hiro said about the federal police covering up my disappearance when I left this world?”

“It is best to gather more information,” Shade said. “If your world is less ignorant of magic than you initially believed, your actions at the hospital will draw out those who know.”

“Any nibbles, yet?”

“I have not seen anyone with auras above normal rank amongst the investigators, but there are some amongst them who seem out of place compared to the others. I am continuing to look into it.”

“Should we have left more of your bodies at the hospital?”

“Two more would be useful. I will only be able to take the form of a motorcycle instead of a car with fewer bodies on hand, however.”

“That’s fine. Send the bodies over now.”

Two shadow figures slipped out of Jason’s shadow and quickly vanished. Jason retrieved his phone and placed it in his newly enhanced phone case. A few seconds later it rang.

“G’day Uncle Hiro.”

“Hi, Jason. Did you do something to your phone?”

Jason chuckled.

“Were you tracking it? I just installed some security, thanks for helping me test it.”

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Jason made his way to the apartment building next to his town house, where Hiro’s penthouse apartment turned out to occupy the entirety of the top floor. It was large, open and modern in design, with lots of white, cool grey and metal. Jason drooled over the kitchen where a personal chef was working on their dinner.

“You had a haircut,” Hiro said.

“It got a bit out of control in the process of coming back,” Jason said.

“But you’re letting the beard grow in?”

Jason rubbed the stubble on his chin.

“I started wearing one while I was away.”

“Do you go all bushy, or more of a sculpted, archvillain look?”

“Villain all the way,” Jason said.

Hiro led Jason to the entertainment lounge. Showing off the bar, Hiro drank Tasmanian whisky while Jason eyed-off the white chocolate liqueur. He made himself a cocktail that was milky, smooth and sweet.

“So, I’ve been looking into moving this gold bar of yours,” Hiro said as they sat.

“There is someone who can take it off your hands, but he wants to meet you in person.”

“You don’t think I should.”

“I don’t,” Hiro confirmed. “Jason, I operate on the periphery of legality. I’m useful to the people I answer to, at least in part, because I stay more or less clean. This guy I’m talking about is not clean. He’s serious. Dangerous. If you need money, I can help you out.”

“I appreciate that, Uncle. I’d like to go through with it, though.”

“Alright,” Hiro said, not trying to argue further. “We’ll go after dinner.”

“Thank you. There’s something I’d like you to ask you about, Uncle.”

“Oh?”

“What can you tell me about the EOA?”

Hiro frowned.

“Where did you hear about the EOA?”

“I’ve been getting the lay of the land. I heard about them, and something about drugged-up thugs. That’s all I know, though.”

“They’re a gang. Or an organised crime outfit. There are a lot of stories, but not a lot of hard information. Word is that they have international backing, although from who I have no idea. They started taking things over in Perth, maybe two years ago. Melbourne a year after that. Now, they’re eyeing us off here, in Sydney.”

“They just move in and take over?”

“Word is that they’re strange. Dangerous, and not the regular sort of dangerous. They have some kind of drug regimen they use to turn their muscle into ’roid freaks.”

Hiro was watching Jason carefully as he gave his explanation.

“I’m not one of them, Uncle.”

“Would you tell me if you were?”

“I have no idea. I genuinely only heard of them for the first time today. What does EOA stand for?”

“No idea,” Hiro said. “You are into something, though, aren’t you? Coming back from the dead with a walk full of swagger and pockets full of gold. Sleek sports cars and anti-tracking software. It’s all very James Bond.”

“I might tell you about it, someday,” Jason said.

“Is someone going to come looking for that gold bar?”

“It’s not just one bar,” Jason said. “And, no. I obtained the gold quite legally. I just didn’t bring it into the country legally.”

“Why not?”

“I couldn’t explain where it came from, I never left the country legally in the first place and I was dead.”

“Fair enough,” Hiro chuckled. “How many of those bars do you have?”

“More than your dangerous associate can handle. I’ll have to find a way to legitimise it if I’m going to get any use out of it.”

“I don’t know anything about gold regulation,” Hiro said. “I know some good lawyers, so I’ll see if they know someone who works in that field.”

“Thank you, although I don’t anticipate it being a simple process.”

“How much gold do you have, if you don’t mind me asking.”

“The bar I handed to you,” Jason said, “plus thirty nine just like it.”

Hiro took in a sharp breath of air.

“You have four hundred kilos of gold? That’s a market price of...”

“More than thirty million,” Jason said. “It’ll have to be a very good lawyer.”

“No kidding. The lawyer I sent you to today was adequate?”

“He was great,” Jason said. “My legal status should be cleaned up without too much fuss.”

“Any more thoughts on when you’ll let the rest of the family know you’re back?”

“It’s Erika’s birthday next Friday,” Jason said. “I thought I might start by seeing her then, and go from there.”

“A birthday present she’ll really appreciate,” Hiro said. “She wasn’t happy with the investigation into your death. She didn’t let it go for a long time, and was never truly satisfied.”

“She’s always been good to me,” Jason said. “Do you know what happened with her TV show when she moved home?”

“She has a new one now. Beachside Kitchen with Erika Asano. She films outdoors, on the boardwalk right by the Surf Club. Big audience, cooks huge batches of food to give out.”

“I hope she wasn’t meant to be filming yesterday. It was really coming down when I got back.”

“She takes winter off. They asked her to be a judge on one of those cooking shows where they vote people off, but she turned them down.”

Jason chuckled.

“She hates those shows.”