

Chapter 410

Needs of the Moment

His silver-rank attributes placed Jason firmly in the realm of superhuman, but attributes alone were only potential. If not used to their maximum potential they were being wasted, which was what differentiated the best adventurers from the worst. This was something Rufus, Gary and Farrah had repeated over and over during his training. From the very start, they had been looking not just further ahead than Jason but even beyond their own progress at the time. Jason was now stronger and more experienced than they had been at the time.

At iron-rank and even bronze, only specialists like Sophie engaged in wild acrobatics. At silver-rank, though, any essence user not moving like Spider-Man was squandering their potential. The might of the power attribute, fuelled by the recovery attribute, controlled by the speed attribute and guided by the spirit attribute. Just as essences formed a confluence, so did attributes combine into a greater whole.

With his essence abilities sealed away, it was the skill and discipline hammered into him by Rufus, Gary and Farrah that carried him through. Armed with an under-ranked sword marginally better than his bare hands, his only means to confront the living anomalies was pure fighting.

When Jason had used the first stable genesis core, his spirit domain had expanded outwards. The smoky glass with the glimmering internal light spread out from the room it had already taken over and both directions down the hallway. It stopped at the point where the normal hallway gave way to the bizarre materials Jason had already discovered.

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- Your spirit domain has expanded.
 - Interaction with genesis space has instigated uncontrolled secondary evolution of ability [Spirit Vault]. Further interaction will complete evolution.
 - Ability [Nirvanic Transfiguration] has stabilised and refined the secondary evolution path of [Spirit Vault].
 - [Spirit Vault] evolution status: 0.008%.
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Two anomaly creatures emerged, one from each end of the darkened hallway. Both were wildly different from the anomaly Jason already killed and each other, in both appearance and abilities. One scuttled across the ceiling like an insect, looking like an emaciated human with too many elbows and knees. It was fast but Jason knocked it off the wall before stomping and stabbing it to death in fairly short order.

➤ You have defeated [Living Anomaly].

It was frailer than any silver-rank entity he had encountered but its inherent silver-rank damage reduction shielded it from much of the sword's damage. Jason's ability to ignore rank disparity only extended to his own body and his currently-sealed powers.

The second anomaly was much harder to handle. It had human proportions but was featureless and androgynous. As he watched, it took on a more feminine body shape and launched itself at Jason with technique that he recognised. It moved the way he remembered Sophie moving and fought the way he remembered her fighting.

Fake Sophie's bronze-rank techniques were no match for Jason's silver-rank prowess as he defended himself from its attacks and quickly slashed the creature twice with his swords. Jason didn't doubt that Sophie was, like him, far stronger than when they had last seen each other.

Over time, Jason's fighting style had grown more offensive as he learned to incorporate more attacks without compromising his ability to evade or disappear into shadows. Although he would never come out swinging a club, there was more aggression in his techniques. Since Broken Hill and Makassar especially, the transition was not just a matter of technique but mentality.

Now that he was fighting without powers, he moved away from the finesse of his normal style to a more brutal approach. One of the benefits of having learned from skill books was having a broad suite of techniques to mix up his style. His fighting style, The Way of the Reaper, had a very mixed martial arts sensibility of versatility and adaptation.

Although Jason's speed and perception often made his fighting style seem like film choreography, that was when he had all his tools and powers at his command. Even pushing his silver-rank speed and strength to the limits, the living anomalies were silver-rank too. They might have been even weaker than equivalent-rank monsters but Jason was fighting them outnumbered, with what amounted to a sharp stick.

The second anomaly changed again, this time taking the shape of Rufus. Rufus's sword skill, even at bronze, was a match for Jason's. Still, Jason was able to leverage his superior attributes and slowly overwhelm the Rufus clone until it shifted again.

This time it was Farrah, bone splitting out through the creature skin to imitate her conjured armour. This fight swiftly proved futile for Jason. Unlike the Sophie and Rufus shapes, which reflected the bronze-rank powers Jason remembered, Jason remembered Farrah at her current strength. He was also unable to penetrate the armour with his sword.

Suspecting that the anomaly was turning his own memories into weapons, Jason decided to try something unconventional. Gaining distance, he cleared his mind. After years of magical meditation, he could quickly and easily focus his mind on a singular thing, which is exactly what he did. Jason's entire mind was consumed by a single image of the least dangerous thing he could imagine.

The anomaly stopped dead still as its shape shifted from that of Farrah to that of Thadwick Mercer. Jason had never actually seen Thadwick fight, but as he had hoped, Jason's disdain for Thadwick and his capabilities translated into the stolen shape. It even seemed to affect the creature's resilience as Jason's blade easily slid into its throat and it dropped dead.

Jason consumed the two cores he gained from those two anomalies to further expand his spirit domain, which spread far enough to claim each end of the hallway. Three anomalies appeared, all from the same direction this time and he became increasingly pressured as he fought them. After putting them all down, he took stock and explored the ends of the hallways.

The smoky crystal had overtaken the corridor, pushing back the strange gooey material the hall was otherwise made from. As he checked the new boundaries of his spirit domain, he found that one end of the hall ended in a stairwell going up and down. He quickly determined that he was on the fourth floor of a five-storey building.

A normal transformation zone maintained a close relation to the shape it had been in before being transformed. The pastoral plains this zone had covered had nothing remotely like a five-story hotel, dilapidated or not. Jason guessed that the transformation zone had been influenced by the proto-space it overlapped with.

With no idea of how long he had to accomplish his task, Jason was concerned. He was confident he could control how much he expanded his spirit domain and how many anomalies accordingly attacked by how many cores he used at once. With no idea of how long he had to stabilise the transformation zone, he felt the need to accelerate his pace but wasn't confident about taking on more than a few of the anomalies. Even if they were much weaker than equivalent-rank monsters, Jason was much weaker than an equivalent-rank essence user at that moment.

Checking the other end of the hallway, Jason found it looping around to other areas on the same floor. Not wanting to waste time, he decided to keep expanding the spirit domain at his current pace, facing two or three anomalies at a time. He hoped that something would change if he met some threshold of spirit domain size, giving him an exploitable advantage.

He could use his aura within the domain already, albeit without the effects of his aura power. If the domain grew large enough, perhaps even his powers could be restored. Then he could tear through the anomalies like the devil riding a bloody wind.

By the time he had claimed the entire fourth floor, he was not happy with his progress.

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- [Dread Salvation] transformation status: 32.6%.
 - [Spirit Vault] evolution status: 0.098%.
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He strongly suspected the evolution of his spirit vault was directly tied to his progress stabilising the zone. The minuscule percentage suggested he would need to accelerate. His only hope was his sword, which he hoped would open a new path. He moved up a floor and slogged his way through more anomalies to claim it for his spirit domain.

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- [Dread Salvation] transformation status: 68.2%.
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Another floor would likely do it but Jason wanted to stop for a break. Even without using powers and his silver-rank recovery attribute, Jason felt exhausted. With the top floor claimed, he wanted to survey his surroundings from the roof. His aura could extend to any point within his domain and he could feel the roof above with it so he knew the rooftop was now within his domain.

Making his way up the stairs and outside there was no sign of the dome that should have been blocking the daylight sky. Instead, the sky was dark and open, filled with unfamiliar stars forming unnerving, eldritch constellations. They reminded Jason vaguely of magical diagrams and he imagined any rituals based on them would be dark and twisted magic. Which probably meant he would end up with it, somehow.

The stars offered just enough light to make out vast silhouettes moving in the distance, monolithic and alien. Jason couldn't see well enough to make out what any of the shapes were but they towered like skyscrapers. They could just as easily be giant robots, kaiju or Lovecraftian horrors, their distant shapes so vague in the darkness.

"As long as they're not from Evangelion," he muttered to himself. "That show is way more messed up than Lovecraft."

Looking out at the vast space around him he probed the edges of the domain with his restored aura. With his experience working within node space he was able to get a sense of what was going on. The transformation space had inadvertently sliced open the astral

space and blended the reshaping of the physical reality with that of the astral space. Now they were entwined and neither was able to close.

His better understanding of the transformation zone brought good news and bad. The most critical thing was something of a clock on Jason stabilising the space. The astral space and the transformation zone spaces that had been blended together were slowly but sure destabilising. Eventually, both would collapse. The good news was that Jason could sense enough to know that it would take much longer than the two days a normal transformation remained sealed for. Even so, he knew that he would need to pick up the pace by a lot. Even if he had more time than expected, the expansion of the area due to the astral space's influence meant he had a lot of work to do.

Jason looked down at the sword on his hip. One more floor and it should complete whatever change it was undergoing. Although it was a growth item, the sword was stuck at bronze-rank until Gary reforged it. Ideally, the transformation would throw off the shackles of that limitation and allow it to rise to silver rank, thus becoming a more viable weapon. At the moment it was barely better than Jason's fists and feet.

If the sword became stronger, Jason could start using more stable genesis cores at a time. He already had a collection of the cores, having declined to escalate the expansion rate of the spirit domain with them. All that was left was to complete the sword transformation and see, so after a rest on the rooftop, he headed for the unclaimed third floor.

Worried about the amount of work ahead, Jason used enough cores to send five anomalies his way. He realised his mistake immediately as each anomaly was strange and unpredictable making each combat a new experience. He only killed the last one after it half swallowed him, leaving him severely injured. A fleshy ball, it had a giant, toothy mouth that shot out tendrils to grab him and drag him in to be consumed. His legs were chewed up and partially dissolved in digestive acid before he killed the creature and dragged himself out.

Jason lay on the floor of the newly extended portion of his spirit domain. Normally, after a fight, he would simply use his blood harvest power for massive recovery. It was a power he rather took for granted until it was gone. Having suffered enough damage than even Colin's regenerative power was taking time to heal him up.

Jason pulled out a tin of healing ointment and started rubbing it on his legs. It was one of the most common items any loot power produced, and while it was of little use to Jason and his many recovery powers, it was a reliable source of cash if he needed some quick coin. Healing items were always welcome and Jason accrued so many that he

donated most of them. In the other world he had handed them off to Jory's clinic, while in this one it was usually the Network or the Asano village's medical centre.

Rubbing the unguent on his wounds, bereft of powers, took Jason back to his arrival in Pallimustus. He recalled the shock and confusion he experienced, convinced he had gone insane as one impossibility after another piled up. Once more he found himself in a place he struggled to understand, fighting to stay alive and find some kind of path forward. He was even mostly pantsless again, his trousers having been all but destroyed by the creature chewing on his legs.

Recognising that massive downtime would not accelerate the end result, Jason went back to a slow and steady pace of slow expansion, fighting three or four anomalies at a time. Finally, as he had most of the third floor claimed, he got the result he'd been waiting for.

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- You have defeated [Living Anomaly].
 - Interaction with [Living Anomaly] has instigated random changes in weapon [Dread Salvation]. Further interaction will consolidate change.
 - Ability [Nirvanic Transfiguration] has stabilised and refined changes to weapon [Dread Salvation].
 - [Dread Salvation] transformation status: 100%.
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“Moment of truth.”

- Dread Salvation has undergone changes deeply affected by the powers of its wielder.
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Jason looked at the simple message.

“Huh.”

He held out his sword to examine it.

Item: [Dread Salvation] (bronze rank [growth], legendary)

A sword crafted with gratitude, in hope of it being the greatest use in the moment of greatest need. It was bound to its wielder and his powers by extreme and unusual forces; it carries the arrogance of one who would remake reality in his own image. Due to the lacking craftsmanship, most of its potential is sealed until the original craftsman demonstrates his growth by reforging the weapon (weapon, sword).

- This item is bound to [Jason Asano] and cannot be used by anyone else. This bond allows the weapon to share the wielder's ability to ignore rank disparity.

- Effect: You may imbue your aura into the weapon, increasing its damage for an ongoing mana cost. Damage and cost scales with the amount of aura strength imbued, up to the limitations of the weapon's current state. Aura strength over that required for the maximum damage output reduces the mana cost.
 - Current rank: Bronze.
 - Current maximum damage increase: Moderate.
 - Current maximum mana cost: Low. Decreased from moderate by wielder's aura strength. Mana cost cannot be eliminated entirely, regardless of the wielder's aura strength.
 - Effect: ??? (Sealed).
 - Growth conditions (silver): Sealed.
 - [Dread Salvation] has reached the maximum potential of its current form. It must be reforged by the original craftsman in order to advance further.
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Jason read over the changes to his weapon. It had lost its old abilities but that was not a concern, given their limited value to him. He suspected that the sword bonding to him somehow recognised that and changed accordingly, changing into a state that met the extreme needs of the moment. Even in its current sealed state, the weapon was far more useful.

- You have three soul-bonded items. You qualify to use the [Soul-Imprinting Triune].
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It was an item he had looted from the intelligent gold-rank monster, King. It was something he had been unable to use, thus languished in his inventory. Now that had changed and he pulled the item out to examine it.