

Chapter 412

You Have to Be True to Yourself

The mist produced by his cloud flask in amulet form swirled around Jason, mostly gathering around his feet as if only slightly heavier than air.

“It’s like there’s a dry ice machine hidden in my underpants.”

By concentrating, he could make the mist take various forms. A shield was easy to produce and an obvious use but he knew the defensive properties would be mediocre. He continued to experiment and established several things about his cloud flasks new abilities. He could send the mist to form a construct anywhere within his aura range that he could see, but once it was formed it could no longer move, dashing his hopes of flying on a cloud like the Monkey King. Floating furniture was easy and convenient, but fine, precision objects like keys or wire mesh were out of the question. What he could do was create multiple, small constructs at once.

Sophie had an ability called cloud step that allowed her to treat the air as solid ground. Now that Jason could make cloud constructs, he could do the same with actual clouds allowing him to air walk on them like floating steps.

His silver-rank agility would allow him to make acrobatic use of it in combat, although it would take some practise first. While extreme mobility had long been a part of his training, he was far behind Sophie in combat acrobatics.

Fortunately, Jason anticipated no shortage of chances to practise. He made his way down the stairs, to the landing between the third storey, which he already claimed, and the second storey, where his spirit domain currently ended.

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- You are at the border of your spirit domain. Minimum cost to expand: 3 [Stable Genesis Core]. Would you like to expand your spirit domain?
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He gave his mental assent.

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- How many [Stable Genesis Cores] will you expend to expand your spirit domain (26 available)?
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It had taken a total of nine cores to claim each floor, which thus far he had done in patches.

“Nine,” Jason said as he drew his sword. He started walking down the stairs as they transformed into dark crystal.

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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: 1.936%.
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Jason concentrated his aura on the sword in his hand as he reached the bottom of the stairs. He fed as much of his aura strength into it as he could but its capacity was disappointingly limited.

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- Damage of [Dread Salvation] has been enhanced to maximum current level
 - Current damage increase: Moderate.
 - Ongoing mana cost: Low.
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He could already hear the anomalies scrambling in his direction. The first three reached him quickly, one humanoid, one snake with a giant eyeball instead of a head and one scorpion with no pincers but multiple tails. At the end of each tail, instead of a stinger, there was a baby's face, mouths wide open to reveal long, pointed teeth.

Jason only reflected for a moment on the macabre creatures before rushing to meet them. The snake leapt forward and Jason met it with the sword point on, burying the blade to the hilt through the creature's bulbous eye. No longer subject to silver-rank damage reduction, the powered-up sword was finally showing its worth. With its damage enhanced, it plunged easily into the snake anomaly, killing it immediately.

The scorpion skittered forward and Jason launched into a spinning flip, severing all three tails in a horizontal slash and landing in a crouch. Springing back up, he made short work of the humanoid anomaly, taking off an arm and then a head before it collapsed. He kept moving, wanting to catch out the anomalies before too many of them bunched together.

By the time he was done with the entire level, Jason had dealt with sixteen anomalies on that floor. There didn't seem to be a set number of anomalies per genesis core used to expand his territory. As far as Jason could tell it was a combination of individual anomaly strength and total size of the domain. The larger it got, the more anomalies appeared per core used to expand it.

Condensing his mist shroud into a chair, he sat down to take stock of what he had learned. For one thing, the anomalies were even weaker than he thought, despite their silver-rank auras. Aside from their silver-rank damage reduction, few showed any power beyond that of a bronze-rank monster. With his silver-rank attributes and newly empowered sword, Jason could easily mow through the living anomalies. He had a sneaking suspicion that things would not remain quite so easy as he continued expanding the domain.

His other gain was a better understanding of what he could do and accomplish with his mist shroud. Even against the weak creatures, the objects he could create provided no real defence but were useful for obscuring vision and delaying an opponent for a brief but critical moment.

Jason hadn't come out of the fights unscathed, so he rested in the chair long enough for Colin's regenerative powers to restore him. Then he stood up and moved to loot the scattered anomalies before heading for the last of the building's five floors.

After Jason entered the portal set into the top of the dome, the factions waiting to exploit the transformation zone gathered around the portal. Each unwilling to surrender benefits to the others, they were still negotiating who should go in when the portal sealed, shortly after Jason had vanished through it. The ring of crystal set into the dome remained, but inside it, the roiling energy was cut off by the same glassy surface as the rest of the dome.

Jason completed the ground floor at a run, hitting his stride as he made short work of the anomalies. The entire building was now incorporated into his spirit domain.

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- You have overtaken a genesis space territory and purged all anomalous elements.
 - Completed territory is being remade.
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Everything in the hotel had been changed into dark crystal as he claimed it but otherwise remained the same. Shortly after the last anomaly was looted and dissolved, that started to change as the entire building was restructured. The crystal started shifting around him, walls breaking apart and morphing into new shapes. He stood rooted on the spot, worried about getting caught up in the transformation.

It quickly became apparent that the building was transforming into a larger version of the pagoda from Jason's spirit vault. As alcoves started appearing in the wall for flowers to

grow out from, this became even more apparent. These were the same flowers that appeared in the gardens that sprawled around the pagoda in his spirit vault.

Jason knew that his task was to stabilise the transformation zone that failed to consolidate due to merging with a proto-space. Now he discovered that meant turning the transformation space into an oversized replica of his soul. The problem was that, as far as he could tell, the proto-space had made the space inside the dome larger than the space it occupied outside.

Jason had no idea how much territory he would have to claim to effectively stabilise the transformation zone. Enough to cover the original space or the expanded area created by the proto-space? What would happen when the dome no longer separated the space outside from the space inside? He was pretty sure that the same place trying to be two different sizes at the same time would be very, very bad.

Finally, the changes to the building were completed, leaving Jason in a large atrium on the ground level. He could sense that the space around him had changed, becoming more stable. It had the heavy permanence of node space, rather than the chaotic fragility of a proto-space in the process of collapse.

Looking around, the dominant feature of the atrium was the water spilling down from the mezzanine second level dropping into a pool in the middle of the atrium floor.

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- Your spirit domain has claimed a territory.
 - Territory has been renamed [Arrival Pagoda].

 - [Spirit Vault] evolution status: 4.1%.

 - Anomalies attacking as a result of further spirit domain expansion will have increased power.
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“And there it is,” Jason said, reading the system message. “I knew it was too easy.”

When the portal atop the dome unexpectedly opened again, the various forces gathered around it watched one another nervously. They still wanted to stop anyone else from seizing whatever treasures lay within but also didn't want to miss another window for entry. The local faction leaders stood around the portal, only their most important subordinates with them by unspoken consensus. They came to an agreement and volunteered some bronze-rankers to go through. One vampire, one essence user and one of the EOA's personnel were selected, although the Network factions were unhappy about

having one person represent them all. This was especially true when it was the network ritualists who had been trying to open the portal back up, albeit to little effect.

The results of entering the portal were not good as the people who went in stumbled back out after only a few moments, looking as if they'd been dipped in acid. This put paid to sending anyone else through until the Network faction put forward a proposal. Their ritualists would collaborate on finding a way to enter safely, on the condition that all the Network factions could send participants individually for the next attempted to go inside. That meant the old leadership faction, the Americans, the Global Defence Network and the Chinese, who had belatedly arrived.

The Chinese Network branches had been keeping to themselves while an information blackout all but sealed off the country. Normally, other factions and governments would have taken the time and effort to pierce that veil but with the world in chaos, if anyone had, they were keeping to themselves. Rumours of what China's Network branches were up to ranged from they'd been overrun by the Cabal to they had taken over their own country, more successfully than the Americans had with theirs.

At first, the Slovakia transformation zone was one more event the Chinese didn't show up for, but following Jason's arrival and entry, they had mobilised their forces and claimed a site around the dome. Now the leader of the Chinese forces, Miss Li, proposed that the Network factions pool the knowledge of their ritualists to find a safe means of entry.

The other factions reluctantly accepted and the Network immediately presented dimensional probes. It turned out that every faction had the same idea and had already been reinforcing the probes they used to test proto-space apertures in preparation.

Jason explored the pagoda, which was a broad and elaborate residential complex. The dark crystal remained the primary construction material but now it was filled with furniture and plants everywhere. Flowering plants covered the walls like wallpaper, their bright colours forming nebula-like patterns.

"Gordon, were you in charge of the decoration?"

The furniture was more subdued, with dark wood and light fabric, providing a sober contrast to the colourful flowers. What Jason liked the most was the breeze that gently tussled at his clothes and carried the delicate scent of flowers through the rooms and hallways.

The building wasn't even the same shape as it had been, having changed from a rectangular box to an octagonal design. The roof was no longer accessible, being sloped

instead of flat, but each floor had balconies running around the outside. As he wandered around, Jason found the hotel turned into what was a lot like a high-end apartment building.

“I don’t think I’ll be able to charge a lot of rent,” Jason mused as he walked through a wide hallway washed with cool light by crystals set into the ceiling. There was even a water feature that ran through the central hallways on every floor, all running down to a waterfall giving the hallway a courtyard feel with the plants and the high ceiling.

Jason followed his senses to the fourth floor, where he had sensed the portal he arrived through open back up as the territory reshaped itself. Now, instead of a circle in the ceiling, it was a more familiar arch. It was set in place as a permanent fixture in a room dedicated to it and Jason looked around curiously.

“It’s kind of like a bathroom except with a portal instead of a place to do a poo.”

As he watched the active portal, a small drone floated through and he grabbed it. Immediately it started dissolving like ice plunged into boiling water and was gone after a few seconds.

“Huh.”

“Well?” Miss Li demanded of the drone operator. They were next to the portal, the operator holding a tablet that should have been receiving data.

“No signal at all,” the operator said. “Not even a destruct signal. I don’t think anything can get through the portal.”

Jason head popped up through the portal and looked around curiously.

“Oh, g’day, Miss Li. It’s been a while, do you remember me? It’s Jason. Jason Asano.”

Miss Li had been part of the team that attempted to recruit Jason to China’s cause after the Network became aware of who and what he was. She glared at what looked like Jason’s disembodied head, sticking out of the portal.

“I remember, Mr Asano. I also remember the discourtesy you showed my country during your unannounced visit.”

“My what? Oh, the thing where I sent all that concentration camp footage to... um, I mean, what footage? I mean, I didn’t say footage. Visit where, now? Uh... how you livin’ girl?”

The vampires, essence users and EOA enhanced humans all looked at Jason in confused, awkward silence.

“I’m just going to go,” Jason said sheepishly and his head ducked back inside.

Jason's head felt very tingly after being in a reality very different in nature to what his body was and he shook his head.

"I kind of like it."

He wondered about the events going on outside briefly before pushing them aside as irrelevant. Even in Jason's domain, the caustic energy of a node space was still present, so they were welcome to try coming in.

"That Miss Li still has that formal yet sultry thing going on. Too bad she's evil."

During the six months in which he wandered across Asia, Europe and Africa, Jason had spent a decent amount of that in China. He had not liked what he discovered about how the Network branches there were operating and sowed a few seeds of trouble before moving on.

Another drone came through, suffering the same fate as the first.

"Good luck with that," Jason said and left the room.

He made his way down the levels of the pagoda, feeling relief at having a way out of the transformation zone. There was no telling exactly how much he needed to stabilise it to stave off disaster, so at least now he could push things as far as possible without getting himself killed and then leave, hoping that he'd done enough.

He reached the second floor and jumped off the mezzanine right before remembering he no longer had his slow fall cloak. His silver-rank body could easily endure the fall but his pride could not and he desperately formed a cloud bed to catch himself, right before he smacked into the ground.

"That worked out nicely," he said, nodding his approval as he put his hands behind his head. He considered the pagoda-shaped residential complex, from the water feature hallways to the ubiquitous wall planters to the vast atrium with its own waterfall. He hadn't found the source of the water, although he never really looked. At this point in his life, it wasn't worth investigating ever little bit of magic or he'd never get anything done.

"None of this building is very pagoda-like on the inside," Jason said, looking around. "If all this was made by my soul, I think my soul might be a failed architect. I'll think going warlock ninja as a profession was the right call."

Jason looked at the double doors leading to the outside to whatever new challenges lay beyond.

"Don't open them both," he told himself. "You only need one door. Opening them both would be cheesy and melodramatic. For once, don't be a chuuni and go through one door like a regular person."

Walking up, he pushed both doors open.

“I guess, in life, you have to be true to yourself.”