

## Chapter 870

### Time, Resources and Dedication

Jason's martial art, *The Way of the Reaper*, was unlike anything from Earth. Anything realistic, at least; there were plenty of sketchy ninja movies from the eighties with a similar feel. More than just a martial art, it was a full training system for a magical assassin. It incorporated combat skills, acrobatics, stealth, and traversal techniques from climbing to parkour.

The training system had methods for incorporating essence abilities. These were focused around assassination-friendly powers of deception, mobility, and afflictions like poison. It all suited Jason very well. There were also an escalating array of techniques for higher ranks, where superhuman prowess turned the impossible into the merely outlandish.

It was all too much for normal humans. Too much to learn. Too much to keep in practice without skill degradation. It was designed from the outset to use skill books. To be learned by those with the enhanced mental and muscle memory of an essence user. Someone who could live for decades at peak physical fitness and beyond. Who could use a skill they mastered a dozen years ago as if they'd kept in practice the whole time.

Most of all, it took time. More time than a normal human had. Even essence users couldn't properly approach it without skill books. A combat savant like Sophie could take parts and create her own variant style, disregarding the rest. Jason lacked her talent and had to learn it all the normal way.

Even with skill books and years of experience, there were massive parts of the martial art that Jason had never explored. Some he never would, being for inhuman body shapes or employing magic powers he didn't have. Others he had taken to as he ranked up, gaining the superhuman strength and speed they required.

As time passed in the otherworldly combat zone, Jason faced defeat after defeat. However much he improved, however much he grew, he was inexorably pushed deeper and deeper into his own soul.

Although he made the rules of the battle, he had also been forced to maintain balance with his opponents. He'd given them forms, but he wasn't free to just make them all weak. He was able to balance them out against himself, but there had to be give and take.

Knowing that he would need opponents that would push him, he made sure that they would always outdo him in combat potential. As his long-stalled essence powers finally

started to grow, so did his enemies grow more powerful. Whether his advancements were in his skill or his finally advancing essence abilities, the great astral beings stayed ahead of him. If the trade-off for always being stronger was being maybe a little oblivious in areas unrelated to battle, that was part of the balance too.

As Jason grew stronger, he started adapting the way he fought. He'd stopped using his own arms to wield his sword, instead giving it to a conjured shadow arm. These arms were more flexible, less vulnerable and could shift around his body instead of being attached at the shoulder.

Freed from the limitations of a purely human form, Jason could use the flexibility to expand his combat repertoire. He could draw on techniques previously unavailable, which were especially useful when fighting in the open. Shrouded by his cloak, fighting him was more like facing a cloud of darkness than a person. Flexibility in where his sword was made the position of his body and the source of his attacks even harder to predict.

The cloak itself was part shield and part weapon. Able to become tangible or intangible, in full or in part, it never restricted Jason. The same was not true for his enemies who were faced with a versatile constriction tool. In trying to strike at Jason's hidden form, limbs could be tangled and attacks yanked off course.

The cloak was easy enough to pull free of, but fragments of seconds mattered. Jason had long understood that a battle between wielders of powerful magic was a war of stolen moments. That only become more true as rank and power escalated.

Slowly but surely, Jason progressed in his mastery of The Way of the Reaper. He shored up his ability to stand his ground in a fight, albeit in his own elusive way. He better learned to use his powers in open battle and not just skulking hit and run attacks.

The most misused powers at his command were those of his familiars. To varying degrees for each, he had been using his companions as separate entities and not integrated aspects of his own power set. The more he rectified this, the more he realised how foolish and wasteful he had been.

Shade had always been the familiar Jason had worked with the closest. The shadow companion was Jason's best teacher and would never have allowed him to completely waste the potential of their synergies. The more Jason improved, the better able he was to work with Shade. As he increasingly focused on working with Shade, the more Jason realised his familiar had been waiting for him to catch up. Once Jason found the humility to truly listen and learn, he found that Shade had much to teach.

The practical results of this was that Shade was much harder to pin down. Jason had often used him for shadow-jumping targets, but that had left Shade in the open as a forest

of shadows. As they were no longer low-rank, there was no shortage of enemies with magic who could cut down Shade's ethereal bodies. Under Shade's tutelage, Jason worked on communication and anticipation between himself and his familiar. He learned to aim for Shade when he was still in hiding, in the shadows of the battlefield or even the shadows of the enemy.

The result was Jason becoming less predictable and Shade less vulnerable. This allowed the familiar to become more active in his own right. He could actively set up shadow-jump sneak attacks, knowing Jason would seize opportunities he would have missed in the past. Shade could also make good distractions with sudden and unexpected mana draining.

Shade was the easiest to work with. He was ancient, experienced, and had the strongest natural synergies with Jason. Improving his teamwork with the other familiars was harder. They were both young, being no older than Jason's adventuring career. Their powers were also less directly convergent with Jason's own, especially Gordon's.

Colin was, at least, a powerful source of afflictions. Jason had been wasteful of his potential, however, mostly dumping huge piles of leeches and hoping it worked out. Now that Colin had a variety of forms, he and Jason strove to make the most of each, turning Colin into a force multiplier instead of an unreliable trump card.

Colin's original form was simply a mass of leeches. Instead of hosing enemies with massive swarms, Jason learned to distribute them in targeted clusters. Not only was this a more efficient use of Colin's biomass but prevented one well-placed area attack from wiping most of it out.

If the leeches proved effective and weren't being efficiently countered, Colin's second form became a solid option. The worm-that-walks form was a bundle of leeches, bound into a vaguely humanoid shape by a mass of bloody rags. This form wasn't fast, but the rags could shoot out, grab opponents and drag them to the leeches for devouring.

In instances when Jason's own abilities were proving most effective, Colin's blood clone form could mimic him. Colin inherited many of Jason's skills and abilities in this state, and while the clone didn't double Jason's power, it certainly provided a serious additional threat.

Finally, Colin's last form was for the times Jason still needed to use him as a powerful trump card. Colin's blood abomination form was energy-intensive, needing to constantly feed to simply maintain its existence. That was exactly what Jason wanted it for, however, the ever-shifting and always ravenous monstrosity always having an impact on the battlefield.

Gordon was the familiar Jason had the hardest time working with. Jason usually kept him at a remove in combat due to what he had seen as power incompatibility. Shade's shadowy nature and Colin's afflictions aligned with Jason's powers to greater and lesser degrees, making what was already strong even stronger. Gordon's beams and shields were useful but didn't seem like a good fit with Jason's stealth and afflictions.

When Jason had first initiated the epic training battle against the great astral beings, his core intent had been to strip away his crutches. To take away every external advantage he'd relied on to cover his weaknesses. While two years of fighting had helped him better understand those weaknesses, it hadn't made them go away.

The revelation had come when Jason learned to stop thinking of Gordon as an external force, separate from himself. Over the span of Gordon's short life, he had shown Jason time and again that they were connected, intrinsically and forever. When he finally learned to see Gordon and himself as parts of each other, he felt like a bad friend. He finally came to understand that he had been wasting Gordon by sending him off to fight alone. That the very reason the pair were different was that the very nature of their powers was to cover for each other's shortcomings.

Where Jason had to evade, Gordon could shield. When heavy armour or a magical barrier prevented afflictions from being applied, Gordon could crack them. As for the familiar, his beams excelled at penetrating defences, but dealt limited damage once through them. For that, he needed Jason. Gordon could expose a heavy defender in the front of a formation, or shielded healer in the back, and then Jason could go to work.

Jason was startled at how effective working more closely with his familiars made all four of them. He felt like a fool for having wasted so much potential, underutilised them so drastically over the years. Of all the things he had failed to make effective use of, one stood out when he started employing it more.

Gordon's most underused ability was the power to detonate his orbs. So different from Jason's mindset of sneaking and whittling enemies down with afflictions, Jason had rarely called on it. As he forced himself to try different combat strategies, Jason came to appreciate a simple truth that his narrow approach had been hiding from him: sometimes you just need to blow stuff up.

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Alongside working with his familiars and mastering his martial art, there was one other aspect of combat Jason had been focusing on. The combat trance was a semi-meditative state that, while not an essence ability, could only be achieved with a magically enhanced mind. As it was a skill and not an innate power, it was easily missed by

improperly trained essence users. Like aura mastery, it was a key indicator of an elite adventurer.

At low ranks, everyone's combat trance was the same. Primarily useful to melee combatants, it 'turned off' certain aspects of the mind in order to reach a state of heightened focus. Something akin to the early stage could even be achieved by some exceptional normal-rankers. Jason had first achieved it at bronze-rank.

As rank and mastery of the technique increased, essence users tailored their own combat trances to their own needs. What they did, when they were used and for how long varied from person to person. For some, it was a near-perpetual state of empty mind, hyper-focused on every moment.

This was common to sword masters, and Sophie took a similar approach. She spent most of her fights in a combat trance that allowed her to better control her blinding speed. For Humphrey it was about fighting by the most efficient means, from how he moved to how he spent his mana. Others, like Clive and Neil, focused on broader battlefield awareness, taking most of the combat out of their combat trances. Their trances operated in short bursts, letting them parse complex battlefields in a moment.

Jason had been attempting to shift his combat trance to be closer to that of Clive and Neil. He wanted important bonuses in critical moments rather than an extended enhancement to his swordplay. The basic form of a combat trance worked best with orthodox fighting styles anyway, which was not the way Jason was going. Rather than enhance a fighting style he was moving away from, he was looking to the challenges of the future.

Many essence users had enhanced speed. Essences like swift and lightning were common while exotic choices like the time confluence could be outright terrifying. Even something like the sun essence gave Rufus flashes of brilliant speed. It was too strong a weapon to have no answer to.

It was more than just other essence users. Smaller, lighter monsters were usually faster, and even the larger ones could have powers that accelerated them in bursts. That would only become a greater problem with gold-rank monsters whose powers were more exotic and more numerous.

What Jason needed against such opponents was time. Time to react. Time to strategise. Time to adapt to an ever-changing battlefield. Time to see an enemy moving at Sophie's pace before it was too late. She was already borderline gold-rank with her speed, to the point that Jason could barely track her. It would only get worse at gold-rank.

Jason did have one way to compete. He could speed himself up by draining the remnant life force of slain enemies. Not everyone would be kind enough to throw mooks at him as if they were bosses in a video game, though. In any case, competing was the wrong approach.

Trying to match up to someone like Sophie was pointless. She didn't have just one ability to enhance her speed but an entire power set built around it. Sword masters were the same, known for being better against other essence users than monsters. As for monsters themselves, one essence ability could not keep up with a creature whose entire physiology was built for magically enhanced speed.

Jason didn't think that a combat trance could compensate for all that. Other essence users had their own combat trances and he would never beat them at their own game. But he didn't need to be as fast as the other guy. He just needed to think fast enough to see the other guy coming.

What Jason wanted was to accelerate his perceptual speed. It was beyond the scope of a trance to actually speed him up, at least at silver-rank. There was no telling what diamond-rankers were capable of, but that was a question for the future. All Jason wanted for now was to think faster. To give him the mental moment to plan, or react to someone whose speed wildly outclassed him.

The process of altering Jason's combat trance started by giving up its strengths. The extreme focus that aided his swordplay was diminished and he could not hold the trance state for as long. The monsters he was endlessly fighting helped. Like him, they returned after every death, and were reacting to his needs. They slowly but surely became faster, forcing him to adapt.

It took time for him to notice the gradual improvement. The less time his combat trance lasted, the slower the world seemed to get, but he barely realised it was happening at first. As days passed into months and months into years, the trance got shorter and his mind got faster. Two years into his otherworldly battle, entering his combat trance felt like stepping into treacle, his body barely moving. He knew he had further to push, but he also knew he shouldn't take it too far.

He could feel the strain as he pushed his silver-rank mind to its limitations. It lasted only moments and no longer placed him in a zen-like state of unfettered hyperawareness. Pushing the ability to a more exotic variant meant that it would require more to master, and his silver-rank mind was already nearing its limitations. He would keep working on it, but knew that he would be gold rank before he considered it a completed technique. But for now, he was satisfied.

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Mastering The Way of the Reaper in less than a century was unrealistic. To do so would require years of endless, gruelling combat. A ceaseless war against opponents with the skill, power and numbers to make survival impossible.

And then surviving anyway.

Jason let out a groan as he came back to life. Years of endless, gruelling combat left an inescapable echo of exhaustion, even when he respawned in a fresh and energetic body. They'd entered a break period while he was respawning, one of the precious and too-short reprieves from combat. The food carts for the current break were supplying soft pretzels, so Jason grabbed one in each hand.

He looked over at the Reaper in his pale human incarnation. He was staring off into space, the way he did during every rest break. Jason walked over to stand beside him, looking off into the jungle that lined the wide road.

"The Order of the Reaper," Jason said. "An offshoot of your cult on Pallimustus, yes?"

"Yes," the Reaper said. "They paid only lip service to my principles while using my name in the pursuit of secular power."

"That's what I've heard. It's left me wondering about the martial art I got from them, The Way of the Reaper. Is that something they developed when they turned into political assassins, or a holdover from when they were proper cultists? Basically, did you have any input, or is the name just a branding exercise?"

The Reaper finally moved, turning his head to look at Jason with curiosity.

"Searing a mark in flesh with a heated iron?" he asked.

"Uh, no," Jason said. "Branding, in this case, means using a name to add implied value in lieu of adding actual value. In short, is this a style you had a hand in, or did they just slap your name on it?"

"The techniques you practise were developed by my cult. They are traditionally restricted to individuals raised within the cult and selected to train for decades, in preparation of the most difficult missions. You should understand, now, that the study of these methods is not to be undertaken lightly. Without time, resources and dedication, one can only display the shallow results you did when this battle began two years ago. Only now are you beginning to show actual results."

"Huh. So, I'm starting to get it right?"

"Starting' being the operative word."

"You don't have to be a dick about it."

"I have to do something with my time here."

Jason peered at the Reaper with narrowed his eyes.

“Was that... a joke? That was a joke, wasn't it?”

Jason turned and waved his arms, dripping cheese and mustard from his pretzels as he shouted to the scattered great astral beings.

“Hey everyone! The Reaper just made a joke!”

“Really?” the Celestial Book mumbled through a mouthful of pretzel. “Was it any good?”

Jason stopped to think about it.

“You know, for a first attempt, it wasn't bad. Very deadpan, but what do you expect?”