

Chapter 440

One of Asano's Secrets

By the time Jason expanded his spirit domain into a fourth territory, the enemies were growing truly dangerous. Although extremely weak for their rank, they were still gold-rank entities and with each territory Jason claimed, the attacking anomalies grew stronger. In the previous transformation zone, Jason had sent off the gold-rankers before the transformation zone reacted by making the anomalies that rank as well. Jason assumed that since the anomalies here were gold rank, the transformation zone was reacting to the most powerful of the vampires caught up in it.

If it weren't for the fact that Jason retained all his essence abilities this time, he would have struggled to handle even the first territory. Possessing the spirit domain power from the inception of the transformation zone shielded Jason's territory from the negative effects of the transformation zone at large.

The fourth territory was similar to the astral space it had been formed from, being filled with eerie, obscuring mist. It lacked the chasms spanned by crumbling bridges, but there were still crumbling gothic buildings. Most of it was made up of woodland, though, the mist drifting between trees with ethereal silver leaves. Every so often, Jason would find one with a pale white peach dangling from a branch, which he plucked and stowed away.

Item: [Ghost Fruit] (gold rank, common)

Fruit that contains an otherworldly power (consumable, food).

- **Effect:** For a moderate period after consumption, any magical damage inflicted by essence abilities or other innate powers adds disruptive-force damage in addition to the normal damage.

It would have been useful for confronting the ghost-like anomalies that appeared to attack Jason but consuming gold-rank food would do him more harm than good. Fortunately, his powers were able to treat the incorporeal entities as if they were flesh and blood using the afflictions he had picked up at silver rank.

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- **[Mortality] (affliction, magic):** Negates immunity to curses. This includes intrinsic immunities such as from not having a soul or not being alive. Cannot be cleansed while any curse affliction is in effect.
 - **[Blood From a Stone] (affliction, magic):** Negates immunity to blood and poison effects. This includes intrinsic immunities, such as from not having a biology or

corporeal form. Entities without blood can bleed while under this effect. Cannot be cleansed while any blood or poison affliction is in effect.

- [Weakness of the Flesh] (affliction, magic): Negates immunities to disease and necrotic damage. This includes intrinsic immunities, such as from not having a biology or corporeal form. Cannot be cleansed while any disease affliction is in effect.

The afflictions led to the odd sight of ghosts dying like living creatures, leaving behind ectoplasm laced with blood and rot. With the sheer number of them, it left the misty forest dripping in foul goo.

When the final ghost fell, Jason waited for the zone boss to appear, fingers crossed. “Please be the marshmallow man. Please be the marshmallow man.”

When he sensed another almost featureless ghost appear, only much larger, Jason was disappointed. He held his hands out to his sides and cast a spell.

“As your lives were mine to reap, so your deaths are mine to harvest.”

By making them vulnerable to blood effects, Jason could drain the energy from the ghost-like anomalies as if it were life force, drawing it in and absorbing it in a huge wave.

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- You have gained instances of [Blood Frenzy] through the ability [Blood Harvest].
 - You have reached the maximum number of instances of [Blood Frenzy]. Further instances will be converted to instances of [Blood of the Immortal].
 - You have gained instances of [Blood of the Immortal] through the ability [Blood Harvest].

This was the secret to Jason fighting the gold-rank anomalies as they grew stronger. Blood frenzy was a buff that increased his speed and recovery, allowing him to at least partially keep up with a gold-ranker’s speed, even if he couldn’t quite match it. The heightened recovery attribute boosted the effectiveness of his many self-healing powers, including the potent healing of blood of the immortal. Triggered when Jason suffered damage, it was a potent but short-lived healing effect that would sustain Jason in the face of powerful attacks.

Jason looked at his familiars.

“Alright, gents. Back to work.”

“Normally essence users caught in a transformation are rendered unconscious throughout the process but aren’t changed,” Barbou said. “The fact that we’re awake tells us that this is an abnormal transformation zone, similar to the one in Slovakia.”

He looked at Gerling.

“You’re the only one with any experience inside a zone like this.”

“Our abilities were sealed away in the last zone as well,” Gerling said. Given the circumstances, he wasn’t going to keep giving Barbou a hard time. The Frenchman might only be bronze-rank but he was a better ritualist than anyone Gerling had managed to recruit.

“What about ritual magic?” Barbou asked.

“We never tested it in the other transformation zone.”

“That should probably be our first step, then,” Barbou said. “I’ll try a loot ritual on one of these things that attacked us.”

“Asano called them anomalies,” Gerling said.

“He has a power that gives him information on the things he encounters, so he’d know,” Barbou said.

They were in a strange village that looked like a tourist attraction because it was scaled for knee-high people. The anomalies that attacked them were tiny villagers with farm implements, although there had been a carpet of them they had to eliminate. Without powers, they had been forced to physically crush them, which was surprisingly difficult.

While the power level of the anomalies was only around that of a low-end silver-rank monster, their true rank was gold and they proved rather resilient. Many of Gerling’s silver-rank minions had been injured, as well as rather disturbed after killing all the tiny people with their bare hands. Barbou had carefully avoided the fight, atop one of the diminutive buildings.

“What are these things?” one of Gerling’s men asked, holding up an orb swirling with black and red energy.

“PUT THAT DOWN,” Gerling roared. “You want to be a goddamn tentacle monster?”

“That’s where that thing came from?” Barbou said. “Interesting. Did you learn anything from Asano about them?”

“I think he had some way of using them to claim territory,” Gerling said.

“Which is presumably how he created his magic town,” Barbou surmised.

“I don’t think he used them in their current state, though,” Gerling said. “I think he changed them, somehow, but he never told us how.”

“In fairness,” Barbou said, “I wouldn’t have told you either.”

Jason returned to the cloud castle at the centre of his new spirit domain before he expanded into the next territory. Under Jason’s control, the castle had morphed from its

original design in the classic Western-European style to more of a palace. It was now made up of wings centred on the same pagoda to be found at the heart of Jason's first domain.

Rather than head for the pagoda, Jason went to check on the people housed in one of the palace wings. Jason had found more people turned into celestines, much like the farming family from his first domain. This time there were many more, the people who had been caged up in pens. Thus far, he had not encountered any of the ghouls that had been near them at the time.

Jason would have liked to bring out his grandmother to take them in hand but his spirit vault wouldn't open in the transformation space. Being a part of his spirit domain ability, it was tied up in reshaping the space around him. Jason could take items for his inventory, though, so he provided what food he could and left them to their own devices.

After checking on them and fending off most of their questions, he made his way to the pagoda. He rode the elevating platform to the top floor and surveyed his new domain from the balcony. Immediately around the palace were deep pools of water, spanned by narrow strips of land. When claiming that territory, anomalies had crawled up out of the water to attack.

The subsequent territories were quite disparate, from the fog forest to a city reminiscent of Prague, but not the real Prague. It was more like Prague from espionage movies, all shadowy corners and cobbled streets glistening from rain that always seemed to have just happened.

Jason took out one of the items he had taken from the ghost boss.

Item: [Dark Orb] (unranked, uncommon)

Contains the power to unseal the power of darkness. (consumable, awakening stone).

- Requirements: Sealed [Dark Essence] ability.
- Effect: Unseals a random [Dark Essence] ability.
- You have 0 sealed dark essence abilities.

Like all bosses, its loot included an orb to unseal one of Jason's abilities, but this time he didn't need them. It was useless for its intended purpose but Jason took out another item; a doom orb left over from the last transformation zone. Jason completion of the transformation zone had changed it, however.

Item: [Eye of Doom (dormant)] (unranked, legendary)

Contains the potential to bestow spirit domains with the power of doom. Requires more energy before it can be used (consumable, awakening stone).

- Requirements: Spirit domain, [Doom] essence.
- Effect: Adds an additional passive effect to the wielder's spirit domains.
- Current power: 36%
- Consume essence orbs in order to increase power.

The eye of doom looked just like one of Gordon's eye orbs. Jason touched the two orbs together and the dark orb melted into the eye.

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- Eye of Doom has accumulated power.
 - Effect: Adds an additional passive effect to the wielder's spirit domains.
 - Current power: 48%
 - Consume additional essence orbs in order to further increase power.

Jason put the orb away and leaned on the railing, his mind troubled. He was unsure if the Earth's dimensional boundary could handle another shake-up, meaning that Jason would need to completely stabilise the transformation zone to prevent it from punching a hole in the universe. Even with his full powers, he was uncertain about his chances.

With the anomalies growing closer to the strength of an ordinary gold-rank monster with each new territory, Jason was uncertain if he could claim it all. He had grave concerns about what awaited him in the final territories, which he had not risked claiming in the last transformation space.

Jason had two points of consolation that gave him hope for success. One was that his spirit domain already had its defences in place, helping fight against the anomalies in great number. It was growing harder with each expansion, though, as the anomalies became more resilient to the silver-rank effects. The second consolation was the most powerful weapon at Jason's disposal.

At first, Jason thought premature detonation of the nuke had triggered the transformation space, but while exploring the territories he found it again. Not only had the detonation sequence been cancelled but, like most things in the transformation zone, it

had been changed. Jason took it out from his inventory to examine it again. No longer a backpack nuke, it now took the form of an unwieldy rocket launcher.

Item: [Travis' Big Rocket] (silver rank, rare)

Definitely not compensating for anything (consumable, bazooka).

- **Effect:** Launches a rocket containing vast and destructive powers of solar and kinetic energy.

It was silver rank, as the original device had been, allowing Jason to make use of it. He just hoped that when the time came, it would be enough.

Gerling was looking at two orbs, sitting on the ground in front of him. They were identical in size but differed in the colour of the energies swirling within. One was black and red, the unstable cores Gerling was familiar with. The other was filled with blue, silver and gold light.

“So this is how he did it,” Gerling said.

“We can’t be certain,” Barbou said.

“No, this is it,” Gerling said with certainty.

Barbou’s loot ritual had produced the refined version of the orb.

“This is what Asano used to claim the transformation zone for himself,” Gerling said. “He has a loot power, so it was easy for him, but now it’s my turn. I’ve finally dug out one of Asano’s secrets.”

“Even assuming you’re right,” Barbou said, “which is quite an assumption, by the way. There is limited power in this orb. You’re going to need a lot of them if you want to start affected all this space around us.”

“So, you’ll loot more,” Gerling told him.

“I’ll need more spirit coins for that many looting rituals,” Barbou said.

Gerling grinned.

“We still have our racial powers,” he said. “And as it happens, Bennett, here, has a storage power as a racial gift, like Asano.”

“Sure do,” said Bennett, one of Gerling’s minions.

“Bennett,” Gerling said. “Adrien, here, is going to need some spirit coins. How many coins did we take from the base stockpile in Germany?”

“Roughly?” Bennett asked. “A metric ass-ton.”