

Chapter 419

Open to the Unanticipated

Jason examined the loot from the Shadow Giant as it dissolved into rainbow smoke behind him. It was a dark sphere, just large enough to fit in one hand. It was cool and glassy to the touch.

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 5 sealed dark essence abilities.
- Would you like to use [Dark Orb] Y/N?

“Yes.”

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- Ability [Shadow of the Reaper] has been unsealed.
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The orb melted into Jason’s hand in a sensation reminiscent of when he had absorbed awakening stones in the early days of his magical life. As the orb was fully absorbed, Shade emerged from Jason’s shadow.

“Mr Asano.”

“Shade!”

Jason enfolded his familiar in a hug.

“Ooh, you’re quite squishy. It’s nice.”

“This is rather awkward.”

“It’s great to have a friend here, Shade. I’ve been talking to myself a lot and what company I have had has been far from ideal.”

“We have been observing. Colin and Gordon are eager to help and unsealing either would have been more effective than me. While it is good to be liberated, you would be better served by a more combat-oriented companion.”

“Don’t underestimate the value of having someone to talk to. You know I don’t always make the best choices when left alone.”

“Quite.”

"You could have argued a little. Still, maybe the others will be next. There'll be more boss monsters that drop these orbs, right?"

"It seems likely," Shade said. "We can reliably assert that the anomalies attacking your spirit domain are, at least in part, a direct reaction to your presence here."

"Do you think it's some kind of test left behind by the original Builder? Or part of some safety mechanism in case something went wrong with his experiment."

"I would not have the temerity to speak to the mind of a great astral being, particularly one who diverged from its intrinsic purpose. Some idiosyncrasies are to be expected from the new Builder, with its mortal origins, but for the original great astral beings, their purpose is their nature. What would divert them from that is beyond my understanding."

"Maybe he got dumped."

"That seems unlikely."

Jason and Shade stood on the top floor balcony and looked out over the city.

➤ **Initiate transfiguration of new territory Y/N?**

The transformation of Jason's second territory was very different from his first. In the dark sky, the constellations set out like magic circles started to shift. Moving to form a grand circle centred above the pagoda. Then, in the middle of the vast circle of stars, a tiny but blindingly bright light sparked into being before flaring out to take the form of a sun, shining in the dark and bringing daylight to the domain for the first time. A cerulean sky started expanding out to displace the dark of night.

A column of glorious sunlight beamed down on the pagoda, then slowly expanded out to touch every part of the city, Wherever it reached, gold, silver and blue mist came steam up, as if the light were burning away its impurities, obscuring Jason's view.

As the mist cleared, it revealed the transformed city. Previously, when he had claimed it for his domain, it had taken on the colours of Jason's cloud house. Now, as he completed the process of incorporating it into his spirit domain, it wasn't just the colours but the very materials of the cloud house that could be seen spreading out before him. The streets were dark crystal and the footpaths were light stone tiles, but the buildings were all constructed from clouds, like some make-believe kingdom. Gardens and greenery were more prevalent than ever, from planters lining the streets to traffic islands lined with trees and roundabouts containing flowering gardens.

In the sky above, the sunlight-filled blue sky extended as far as the great circle of stars, at which point the previous void of night continued to surround it. Only Jason's domain stood in the light, while the night's gloom continued to hold sway in the regions around it.

Jason and Shade observed the city made of cloud-stuff.

"It can't stay this way if I manage to solve this thing and the transformation zone's dome comes down, can it?" Jason asked.

"We are meddling with the building blocks of reality," Shade said. "Anything is possible."

"It seems odd, though. What I'm trying to do boils down to resolving the incongruity between the world's reality and the astral space reality after the transformation zone mashed them together. How is a magical fairy town not wildly incongruous? It looks like a children's book, or a mobile app hiding its predatory business model behind adorable graphic design."

"Perhaps this is the middle ground," Shade suggested. "You are creating a bridge between the mundane and the magical. Like any bridge, it must cross between them and be anchored on both sides."

"I guess we'll find out, sooner or later."

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- Your spirit domain has claimed a territory.
 - Territory has been renamed [Soul Haven].

 - [Spirit Vault] evolution status: 38.6%.

 - Evolution of ability [Spirit Vault] is tied to the transformation zone. If the transformation zone is stabilised before the ability completes its evolution, the evolution will fail.

 - Anomalies attacking as a result of further spirit domain expansion will have increased power.

 - You have claimed sufficient territory to stabilise the transformation zone and separate it from the convergent astral space.

 - Separating the space with the current territory will have a disruptive effect on the dimensional membrane of the surrounding reality. Claim additional territory to reduce the severity of this effect.

 - Would you like to stabilise the transformation zone Y/N?
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Jason had ostensibly achieved his objective and discussed with Shade the ramifications of stabilising the transformation zone. They immediately agreed that Jason should push on, reducing the impact of doing so as much as possible. The dimensional stability of the world was at the breaking point, so they needed to minimise the damage as much as they could. Jason could live without the ability evolution, but with how much the degree of evolution had jumped with his second territory, he likely wouldn't have to.

Soon Jason was driving through the transformed streets in one of Shade's car forms. The road surfaces were still dark crystal, now in flagstone-style bricks. The cars were gone from the streets and most of the storefronts were now empty. On spotting one that wasn't, Jason excitedly called for Shade to stop, leaping out while the car was still in motion. Jason dashed up to the door, holding himself back from smashing through the glass as he waited the second it took for the door to slide open. He rushed inside and madly searched, only to let out a cry of anguish as he found a small shelf label.

"Mr Asano," Shade said his voice uncharacteristically soft as he emerged from Jason's shadow. "Sometimes in life, we all suffer setbacks. It is how we respond to them that helps us grow."

Jason yanked the label from the shelf and threw it bitterly to the ground before storming out, leaving Shade behind.

"Of course," Shade said to the empty room, "some of us have more growing to do than others."

He picked up the label and returned it to its place.

CRYSTAL WASH OUT OF STOCK – THANK YOU FOR VISITING JORY'S FRIENDLY LOCAL PHARMACY.

Most of Shade's utility came from facilitating other powers of Jason's, with his only direct attack being a mana drain. With the rest of Jason's abilities still sealed, what Shade could do was serve as a distraction and help Jason with stealth, masking his heat and scent. These both proved useful when Jason expanded his domain into the thick woodlands surrounding the city.

The responding anomalies were more hybrids, stronger than those that had come before. With the tight confines and poor sightlines of the forest, the huge and heavy minigun was more hindrance than help, forcing Jason to turn to his sword. With Shade distracting the hybrids and confounding their senses, Jason was able to stage ambushes and manage their greater strength, expanding his domain twice more to claim the entire forest territory.

The boss monster this time was not something he could just blast away with the core launcher. It was a single hybrid, no larger than the others, but with the speed of a fox hybrid and the strength of a bear hybrid. Jason fought it amongst the trees, a contest of agility, speed and skill that left him a bloody wreck by the time the creature fell.

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- Your spirit domain has claimed a territory.
 - Territory has been renamed [Tranquil Shadow Woods].

 - [Spirit Vault] evolution status: 84.7%.

 - Evolution of ability [Spirit Vault] is tied to the transformation zone. If the transformation zone is stabilised before the ability completes its evolution, the evolution will fail.

 - Anomalies attacking as a result of further spirit domain expansion will have increased power.

 - You have claimed sufficient territory to stabilise the transformation zone and separate it from the convergent astral space.

 - Separating the space with the current territory will have a disruptive effect on the dimensional membrane of the surrounding reality. Claim additional territory to reduce the severity of this effect. Current severity reduction: 13.7%

 - Would you like to stabilise the transformation zone Y/N?
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Jason looted another power-unlocking orb from the boss, this time a sin orb. It served as further confirmation that the transformation space was reacting specifically to him. He got lucky with the unlocked power, which was one of his special attacks, Punish.

Punish was one of the few powers Jason had that could synergise with itself by inflicting necrotic damage while also applying the stackings sin affliction, which increased all subsequent necrotic damage. It was an ability representative of Jason's earliest days as an adventurer when his power set was built around low but exponentially growing damage.

The gloom-filled forest was replaced by woodlands where sunlight dappled through the canopy to create a magical twilight. Jason sat slumped up against a tree.

"You should rest," Shade told him.

"I am resting."

"Proper rest. Return to the pagoda and sleep."

"We have no idea when this whole place will collapse in on itself. We may not have that kind of time."

"This amalgamation of a transformation zone and a proto-space has already been in place longer than any previously recorded instance of either. It is showing no signs of instability. You have been awake for around sixty hours, discounting the time you spent unconscious, which was hardly restful slumber. Even essence users need sleep."

"I'm barely an essence user, right now."

"Mr Asano, you have already accomplished your basic goal. If you strive for more without rest you may fail and lose everything. If you rest and the zone shows signs of breaking down, I will wake you and you can stabilise the zone."

Jason opened his mouth to respond but all that came out was a yawn.

"Fine," he conceded, pushing himself to his feet. He condensed the mist from his cloud flask to form a floating bed and fell into it.

"Yeah," he said happily. "That's the stuff."

"Why were you on the ground, leaning against a tree, instead of using that already?" Shade asked.

"Because I'd fall asleep. This is super comfy."

Jason's domain expanded once more. As with previous territories, it transitioned unnaturally into a new biome at the territory's edge. In this case, the transition was to green, rolling hills washed by a chill wind. It was pastoral land, with patchwork fields, scattered barns and farmhouses visible in the distance. Jason's senses were alert for the appearance of the anomalies, but what he sensed first gravely startled him.

"Shade!"

Shade transformed into a black horse with a white mane and leapt into a sprint the moment Jason leapt atop him. Turf flew up under his hooves as he quickly reached speeds a racing bike would have trouble matching.

"I didn't think this would happen," Jason yelled over the rush of air. "I figured if I was going to find them, it would have happened by now. We've expanded way beyond the original area of the transformation zone."

"I believe that, in this place, we must always be open to the unanticipated," Shade said.

"I fought a bunch of spacemen with ray guns, so you won't get any argument from me."

Jason felt the first anomalies cross the border into his domain as he arrived at a farmhouse, leapt off his horse and threw open the door. Rushing through the building to the auras he sensed, he found a group of people standing around, looking at each other in

confusion. Each had pale skin and brassy, metallic hair matched perfectly by the colour of their eyes, marking them as not humans but celestines. They all turned as Jason burst in.

“Come with me if you want to live.”