

## Chapter 441

### Swarm Against Swarm

Jason ducked into one of Shade's bodies and vanished, right before a huge gobbet of webbing splashing into the shadowy familiar. Despite Shade's incorporeal form, the potent magic on the webbing sent him flying backwards and pinned his body to the wall of the vast cavern. The energy in the web rapidly burned away Shade's body, destroying it.

Jason appeared from another of Shade bodies, right underneath the huge creature. He reached overhead to carve his knife through its hair to cut the skin, the long, steel-like bristles scraping his fingers. He shadow-jumped again as it moved to react. Jason's reflexes were already enhanced to the maximum but the spider still caught him with one of the blade-like protrusions on its leg as he jumped.

This boss creature was not that much larger than the normal anomalies in the cave-system territory, but it was much more powerful. It had the full might of a gold-rank monster, complete with exotic abilities. These took the form of special webs, from fire webs that were harmful to Colin to dimensional webs that hurt Shade and Gordon.

Jason had been forced to recall his familiars other than Shade, whose multiplicity of bodies gave him some leeway. Those bodies were being taken down, one by one, though. The advantage of recalling his familiars was that Jason could use the effects he gained from them personally. The two orbs provided by Gordon were valuable shields, intercepting many of the web attacks, although they could only hold up for so long before breaking down and needing to reform.

The spider was also quick and agile for a spider the size of a transit van, but that was unsurprising from a gold-rank greater anomaly. The chitinous blade on its legs were swift and dangerous weapons, bleeding Jason again and again, although never scoring a decisive hit. Gordon's shields soaked the big hits Jason wasn't fast enough to avoid, while the smaller hits were rapidly healed.

The combination of the blood robes Colin gave him and Colin himself boosted Jason's formidable regeneration and drain attacks. Jason afflicted up the spider, hit it with his big damage spell and then drained the curses, diseases, poison and unholy afflictions. This loaded Jason up with powerful recovery effects and the spider with transcendent damage.

True gold-rank power was no joke, however, and that was not enough to finish the job. Jason went through multiple cycles of applying and then draining the sinister afflictions, both to build up a powerful stack of recovery effects on himself and load up the

spider with holy afflictions. Only then did Jason move on to the final stage of the fight, transforming his affliction dagger to its second form, from an unholy dagger to a holy sword.

---

Item: [Penitent, The Blade of Sacrifice] (silver rank, conjured)

*Conjured holy sword for those willing to pay the price for victory in battles to the death (weapon, sword).*

- **Effect:** Attacks refresh any wounding afflictions on the target. Those wounding effects require additional healing to remove.
- **Effect:** Attacks inflict an instance of [Price in Blood]. This affliction is applied equally to the person it is inflicted upon and the person who inflicts it. This affliction cannot be cleansed while a person who shares it is alive and is immediately negated if the person who shares it dies. Dismissing [Penitent, the Blade of Sacrifice] does not remove this affliction.
- [Price in Blood] (affliction, holy, blood, stacking): Damage between people who share the affliction is increased, including damage sources in place prior to this affliction taking effect. Damage from holy sources is further increased by an additional amount. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.

---

Doom Blade's second form was a risk versus reward weapon. The holy affliction it bestowed amplified all damage dealt and received, which is why Jason rarely used it. Only once he was confident in both the afflictions layered on the spider and his own ability to withstand the retaliation did he call it out.

Despite the risks, Jason did not shy from the fight, moving in to strike at the spider, boosting the damage it was suffering with every cut. Finally, Jason opened up with his finisher, Verdict.

*“Mine is the judgement and the judgement is death.”*

Amplified by the holy afflictions wracking the spider, the beam of transcendent light came down from the cavern roof like the judgement of a wrathful god, yet even that wasn't enough to eradicate the spider entirely. Its gold-rank resilience proved its might once more, leaving Jason with the very unusual situation of waiting on the cooldown for his finishing move.

Surviving was not the same as thriving, however, and the ruined spider was on the verge of collapse. Just as Jason thought he'd won, the spider exploded with a force that shook the cavern. Stalactites came crashing down and Jason was sent flying, slapping into the cavern wall like a wet newspaper. There was more to the boss anomaly's explosion

than pure force, however. Its ravaged body had transformed into a storm of spiders that scattered through the cavern.

Jason recovered his sensibilities quickly, this being far from the first time he had taken a mighty whack. He quickly took stock, assessing his heavily injured body and discovering the spider swarm encroaching on him. Despite his injuries, he waved his hand, spraying leeches all around to send swarm against swarm. It meant giving up the extra regeneration when he was badly hurt, but the spiders had to be dealt with and Jason had another plan.

Jason's starlight cloak turned into wings and lifted him into the middle of the cavern. There was plenty of room for them to hold him aloft in the massive chamber as Leeches moved to attack spiders.

The spiders, despite being tiny, were still gold rank and didn't fall quickly to Colin's afflictions. Indeed, since Jason was unreachable, they started savaging the leeches, which they outnumbered and outranked. Even so, the game little leeches were apocalypse beasts and did not go down easily.

"That'll do, Colin," Jason said. The leeches gathered into small piles that shot rags up to Jason, then turned into blood and swiftly flowed up the rags to be reabsorbed. Some of the spiders tried climbing up but Jason let the rags dissolve and they dropped to the floor.

Jason picked out a spider and cast a couple of spells in it. Inexorable Doom started immediately multiplying all the afflictions, while Haemorrhage applied the same afflictions as Colin, plus a bonus; the sacrificial victim effect, which made the spiders more susceptible to drain abilities. Jason then called out Gordon and had him send an orb to trigger the butterflies, spreading the afflictions through the spider swarm.

The butterfly swarm spread, its exponential growth overtaking the spiders in number until every spider was loaded with a growing pile of afflictions. Jason was still heavily injured, but there was a solution for that and he cast a spell.

*"Your blood is not yours to keep, but mine on which to feast."*

---

#### Ability: [Feast of Blood] (Blood)

- Spell (drain, blood).
- Base Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: 30 seconds.
  
- Current rank: Silver 3 (14%).
  
- Effect (iron): Drain health and stamina. Only affects targets with bleeding wounds or who are suffering from the [Bleeding] affliction.

- Effect (bronze): Drains additional health and stamina for each instance of poison on the target.
  - Effect (silver): Increasing the mana cost to very high and the cooldown to 2 minutes allows this spell to target all viable targets in a wide area.
- 

Life force drained from the spiders and was soaked up by Jason. The gold rank anomalies were small but had life force to spare and the afflictions on them allowed the spell to drain even more. It was more than enough to fully replenish Jason's health.

*"Feed me your sins."*

Jason drained the afflictions from the little spiders the way he had again and again with their larger progenitor. The spiders were left glowing with transcendent energy of blue, gold and silver; a match for Jason's eyes.

The gold-rank spiders were tough but there was still a limit to the vitality in their tiny bodies. Colin's afflictions and Jason drain had stolen much of it and the transcendent damage from the penance affliction burned away the rest. The spiders dissolved into rainbow smoke.

---

- You have defeated [Greater Anomaly].
  - [Greater Anomaly] has been wholly annihilated. It has been looted automatically.
  - [Sin Orb] has been added to your inventory.
  - 10 [Gold Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
  - 100 [Silver Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
  - 1,000 [Bronze Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
  - 10,000 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
  - Defeating a higher-ranked monster has provided additional rewards.
  - [Hegemon's Vessel] has been added to your inventory.
  - You have overtaken a genesis space territory and purged all anomalous elements.
  - Return to core territory to initiate transfiguration of new territory.
- 

While Jason was happy to have claimed another territory, his concerns about the future fights continued to grow. This anomaly boss had the strength of a full-flight gold-rank monster, if not an especially powerful one. Even the previous greater anomalies hadn't truly shown the power of their rank but with each territory Jason claimed, the anomalies attacking it grew stronger. It was only a matter of time before even the ordinary anomalies reached that level.

Returning to his palace at the centre of his domain, a small group of newly-transformed celestines approached as Jason arrived on Shade's motorcycle form. Shade returned to Jason's shadow as he started walking past the water fountain roundabout and toward the pagoda.

"Mr Asano," the celestine ringleader said, matching Jason's pace. "We have a lot of nervous and uncertain people, with little idea of what is going on."

"Then I have some bad news for you," Jason said, still walking. "You've got one more than you think."

"We don't know what to do," one of the other celestines pleaded.

"Go back inside and hope I figure out how to save the world. Again. Until then, there's not a lot of point making other plans."

The pagoda doors opened as Jason approached and closed behind him as he went inside.

\*\*\*

"You were rather rude to those people who have undergone quite a lot of trauma," Shade observed as Jason called up a cloud chair to sit in. They were on the balcony of the pagoda's top floor.

"I don't have the time or the energy to be nice," Jason said. "I should have never come here. The vampires are a secondary concern to what I need to do."

"If you weren't here, Mr Asano, who would stabilise this transformation zone?"

"Would it have even have formed if I wasn't here?" Jason asked. "Something triggered it; you felt it, just like I did, and it wasn't the nuke."

"That does not mean it is somehow related to you," Shade said. "That is a conclusion built on far too little evidence."

"Yeah?" Jason asked. "You want to bet on whether this would have happened if I'd stayed out of it?"

"No, thank you," Shade said.

"Exactly."

Jason winced unhappily and closed his eyes.

"I'm sorry, Shade. You're right. I was rude to them and I was rude to you. I'll go and try to calm them down. In a bit. I'm just so bloody weary. I'm tired of this fight, I'm tired of this world and I'm tired of being responsible for it."

"We both know you won't put those responsibilities down, Mr Asano. Rest, as much as you can. You're going to need it."

“No kidding,” Jason said with a bone-tired chuckle. “I don’t see a path to win this, Shade. I’ve made so many mistakes. I should never have agreed to come here. I should have brought Farrah after I did.”

“There is always a path, Mr Asano. You may not like where it takes you or what you have to do to walk it, but it is always there. Defeating the Builder is something most would consider impossible, yet you’ve done it twice. He tried to claim an astral space and he tried to claim your soul. Despite his personal involvement, he was rebuffed in both instances.”

“Extenuating circumstances.”

“There always are, Mr Asano, or you would not have been in those situations at all. This world was going to rupture with the last abnormal transformation zone, yet you held it together. You’ve created your own spirit domain when your power is still so insignificant. That’s the most impossible thing of all and you don’t even understand what it means, yet.”

“But you do?”

“Yes.”

“Are you going to tell me?”

“No. You’ve already placed a foot in a realm you aren’t ready for. I’m not going to place your head in after it. I also suggest you refrain from speaking on it at all once we reach the other world.”

“Fine. You know that in every situation you just listed there were extreme mitigating factors that made what happened possible,” Jason said.

“Which you found and used every time.”

“Actually, that one time it was pretty much all Clive.”

“Do you think those mitigating factors aren’t here to be found now, or are you just too tired to seek them out?” Shade asked. “I hate to break it to you, Mr Asano, but doing the impossible is kind of your thing. To be unfortunately colloquial, it is now time to nut up.”

Jason’s eyes shot open and he stared at Shade.

\*\*\*

Jason made his way down to the celestines. He plastered on what he hoped was a convincingly optimistic expression and tried to settle them as best he could. He was making some headway when he stopped mid sentence, sensing a familiar presence enter his spirit domain.