

Chapter 443

Balls

"This is the part where we go out and save the world," Mr North said.

He and Jason were still in the mezzanine lounge.

"No," Jason said. "This is the part where you stay here until I come back and get you."

"You have something better to do?"

"Mr North, one of us saved the world from the convergence of an astral space and transformation zone threatening to open a wound in the side of the universe. The other one is responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands. Probably millions at this point. Which one of us do you think should be in charge?"

"Really, Mr Asano? Do you think my way or the highway is going to get Gerling and the vampires on board? Don't let your desire to kill us all prevent you from completing the task at hand."

Jason seethed but reluctantly nodded.

"I do have things to do before we take the next step, though," Jason said.

"How do you suggest going about finding the others?" Mr North asked.

"We keep expanding territory," Jason said. "Eventually, they'll be in it."

"I would appreciate being walked through the process before I'm thrown into it."

"I'll do that when I get back, just stay here until then."

"You want me to just sit here and twiddle my thumbs?"

The floor morphed as a table made of cloud-stuff rose from it before solidifying into dark crystal embedded with shifting flecks of blue, silver and gold light. Jason took a notepad and pen from his inventory and dropped them on the table.

"What are these for?" Mr North asked. "A confession of my heinous deeds?"

"You were round in the other universe a long time ago, right?"

"I was."

"How's your memory?"

"I'm gold-rank, Mr Asano. My memory is so good that I could solve crimes alongside a straight-laced detective who can solve any murder except that of her own father."

"You think pop-culture references will win me over?"

"My research on you suggests it's worth a try. How's it working?"

"Better than I'd like," Jason admitted. "You know about the Order of the Reaper?"

"Reaper cultists. Assassins. Lost their way and became politically ambitious. Some kind of internal schism."

“Write down everything you remember. It might prove useful when I go back.”

“And why would I do that for you?”

“A gesture of goodwill. Or don’t do it; that’s up to you.”

Jason moved over to the elevating platform, his face still filled with frustration as it lifted him into the other levels. Once he was out of Mr North’s sight, the expression vanished and a smile curled at his lips.

Jack Gerling slumped against a jungle tree, exhausted.

“You did good, Jack,” said Bennett, one of Gerling’s silver-rank companions. The others were off gathering up the dead anomalies for Barbou to use looting rituals on. Given the numbers, Barbou had been using the largest ritual circles he could make work to loot the anomalies in piles.

In the jungle territory they were currently in, it was hard to find an open space to perform the ritual. They had resorted to hauling them all back to the previous territory Gerling had claimed, which was a wooden town on stilts set in shallow water. There was a town hall there with enough open space to manage.

Gerling recovered quickly. With his gold-rank recovery attribute, the wounds he suffered at the hands of the boss anomaly closed quickly. It also rapidly purged the giant snake’s poison and replenished Gerling’s stamina. Approaching the giant anomaly, he threw his arms around it, just under the head, and started dragging it back to be looted as well.

The looting rituals took hours, during which Gerling and his people left Barbou to work. As the anomalies weren’t monsters, they didn’t dissolve on their own an hour or so after death, giving Barbou time to get through them all. Gerling left Bennett and another flunky to watch Barbou as he and the others returned to the heart of Gerling’s territory. Bennet would collect all the loot in his dimensional space when Barbou was done and follow.

Gerling’s central territory had originally been a village of undersized cottages, the anomalies taking the form of a horde of tiny people. Once he claimed it, it stayed small but transformed into an undersized, cyberpunk-style slum. Neon buildings and miniaturised strip joints spread out in a rat’s nest of streets and alleys, with the humans walking through them like giants.

The only normal-sized building was a tower of glass and steel at the centre; the core of Gerling’s domain. At the top of the tower was a luxurious penthouse where Gerling went

to rest. The rest of his team not tasked with monitoring Barbou stayed in smaller, but no less opulent apartments a floor below.

When Bennett brought back Barbou, he delivered the fresh pile of rainbow orbs looted from the anomalies. They were piled high on the floor, along with the orbs unused from before.

“Well, Jack,” Bennett said, slapping Gerling on the shoulder as they looked over the mound of spheres. “No one can deny you’ve got balls.”

Gerling snorted a laugh. He didn’t know what they were called but Gerling knew they were the refined versions of the black and red orbs that had turned Tran into a vampire and Guo into a tentacle monster. After witnessing those events it had been a risk to use the rainbow variant, but Gerling had been right. They were the key to seizing control of the transformation space.

He was certain that Asano was out there, somewhere in the transformation zone. He didn’t know what would happen when the territories met, but Gerling was confident. With each territory expansion, the anomalies attacking had grown stronger but Gerling had managed to kill three of the boss monsters. From each, he had gained a magical orb that had allowed him to unlock his powers. He knew Asano would have to deal with the same challenges, alone and at silver rank.

Gerling had used two of the power-unlocking orbs and now Bennett had just delivered a third. The first power unlocked was from his vast essence and wouldn’t have been Gerling’s first choice. It was a leaping power that was useful for mobility and let him build up power for enhanced attacks with the leap. It made for a good opening move against larger and slower enemies like the anomaly bosses, but there were many more powers Gerling would have rather chosen over it. His goal was Asano, who was elusive enough that such a power was of little use.

The second power he unlocked was more useful. From the potent essence, it allowed allies within his aura to boost their base attributes by consuming mana. Since their powers were all locked, giving them something to spend their mana on was valuable. At gold rank, the additional features of the power allowed the affected allies to add weakening effects to their attacks. It made them burn their mana even faster, but a silver-ranker not using their essence abilities had mana to spare.

This had been a real boon claiming the territory they had just completed. Since Gerling’s aura covered the entirety of his domain, this allowed his people to use the effect anywhere within it. They were able to spread out and confront the weaker anomalies in

small groups or even alone. They were mostly combat elites trained by the excellent US training programs.

Gerling wanted as many unlocked powers as he could get when he faced Asano. He had underestimated the silver-ranker once and was determined not to do so again. He took the latest orb and absorbed it, feeling the fog sealing another of his ability part like mist in the sunlight. He let out a sinister chuckle as he felt his Immortality power awaken once more.

His gaze turned back to the pile of rainbow orbs on the floor. It was time for the next expansion.

Jason sat on the top floor of the pagoda. He hadn't yet looked at his latest haul from the spider anomaly or triggered the transfiguration of his latest competed territory. The sin orb that would otherwise have unlocked his powers should be enough to finish charging his eye of doom item, so he took both out and let the eye absorb the other sphere.

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- Eye of Doom has accumulated power.
 - Current power: 100%
 - [Eye of Doom] is fully empowered. It may be consumed

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

Contains the potential to bestow spirit domains with the power of doom (consumable, awakening stone).

- Requirements: Spirit domain, [Doom] essence.
- Effect: Consuming the [Eye of Doom] will add additional effects to your spirit domain.

Jason looked at the description. He was sure that it previously said it would add a single passive effect, not multiple general effects. He couldn't help but wonder what changed. Was there something specific about the orbs he was feeding it or was something else at work?

Jason leaned back into the plush cloud chair and considered the item in his hands. The unexpected change made him wary, but it should be safe to use, nonetheless. His identification ability had been unable to show him the effects of powerful items before, but

it had never hidden effects entirely. The Eye of Doom, despite the sinister name, should be safe. The only questions were about the specific effects it would grant. Was there some side effect of a power that was somehow prohibitive?

It was hardly the first time that a description had changed on him. His system was not an objective assessment of the world around him but a function of his own abilities; a power he possessed to sense the world around him that was coloured by his attitudes and unconscious perceptions. He often wondered how affected it was by his conditions and moods. It had always proven trustworthy, yet was, in some ways, an unreliable narrator.

Even with those concerns, Jason once more put his trust in the ability, absorbing the eye, confident that it wouldn't harm him. The orb melted into his hand and vanished. Jason's head was immediately filled with searing pain, as if someone had scooped out his eyes, tipped his head back and was pouring a stream of lava into each socket.

Jason came to his senses, sprawled in his chair and uncertain of how long he had been suffering. He minimised the message window for the moment, letting out a groan as he stayed slumped where he was. One of Shade's bodies stood in front of him.

"How are you feeling, Mr Asano?"

"Like Farrah's magma elemental tried to shag my eye sockets."

Jason opened his eyes.

"Have they changed again?" he asked.

"It does seem to be a regular occurrence, Mr Asano. I know that unconventional eyes are not especially rare in essence users but the regularity with which yours change is reaching the point where I'm becoming concerned."

"Should I be concerned too?"

Jason's eyes still ached, although the mind-shattering pain was gone.

"Do recall that truly permanent change is not to the body but to the soul. Your soul has been hammered into shape more than anyone else I've encountered. You've been carrying heavy burdens and you need time to stop and rest. Real time; not the lull between crises."

"I'm trying to save the world, here, Shade. There's another world waiting and I can rest when I get there."

"I know, Mr Asano. But please keep in mind that it's a soul, not a whittling stick."

Gordon manifested himself and leaned down, positioning his dark, empty hood in front of Jason's face.

"Gordon?"

"You may want to check your eyes, Mr Asano," Shade said.

“Yeah, alright. Excuse me, Gordon.” Gordon moved aside and a stream of cloud-stuff rose from the floor and took the form of a long mirror. Jason looked into his own eyes, seeing they were now eye-shaped nebulas, identical to the one dominating the otherwise empty space inside Gordon’s cloak.

“Oh, nice,” Jason said turning his head side to side. “These look a lot more like eyes. Less uncanny valley. What do you think, Gordon? Thumbs up?”

One of Gordon’s orbiting eye spheres lit up blue, which was his signal for yes.

“Okay,” Jason said. “The cosmetic changes are a winner, if still a bit stingy. I thought the idea was for my spirit domain to get new stuff, though.”

“Your spirit domains are an extension of yourself,” Shade said.

“Fair enough.”

Jason pulled the previously ignored message window back up.

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- You have incorporated the [Eye of Doom] into your spirit vault. This has added additional effects to your spirit domains.
 - Hostile individuals that enter, leave and re-enter your spirit domain immediately regain all previous negative effects inflicted by the spirit domain. Leaving the domain again will still remove all effects.
 - You may remotely view any location within your spirit domain. This vision cannot be foiled or avoided by any effect. At your current rank, this ability cannot be used across dimensional barriers.
 - You may exacerbate the effects of your spirit domain on any individual you can see within it, either in person or via remote viewing.

“That would have been nice to have before those gold-rank pricks went digging my other place up.”

Jason closed his eyes and sent his vision skimming through his domain. He instinctively understood how and didn’t find it disorienting at all. Reaching his latest territory, not yet fully claimed, reminded him of the task at hand. He returned his vision to his own body.

“One last goody and then we get back to work,” Jason said, pulling out the other item looted from the anomaly boss. It was another orb, this one composed of familiar dark crystal flecked with gold, silver and blue light.

Item: [Vessel of the Hegemon] (unranked, legendary)

Forge of the divine chariot (consumable, awakening stone).

- Requirements: Transcendent rank or growth-type vehicle or construct intrinsically connected to an entity with a spirit domain.
 - Effect: Converts the interior of the vehicle or constructed into an extension of the connected entity's spirit domain.
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"Huh," Jason said, looking at the sphere in his hand. "Forge of the divine chariot? It's a ball. Ever seen an item like this, Shade?"

"I have not," Shade said. "It is not unusual for a looting power to produce something specifically tailored to the looter, however."

"It was a bonus item for taking down something higher-rank than me, so I guess that makes sense. Not sure how useful it is, though. Also, I'm not in love with the term 'looter.' It makes me sound like I smash-and-grabbed a television."

Jason plucked the miniaturised cloud flask from his necklace and it expanded to normal size. It was a round-bottomed flask with a cylindrical neck, filled with swirling white and blue energy. Jason placed the vessel of the hegemon orb on it like an oversized stopper and the orb immediately started dissolving, getting sucked into the flask. The energy inside the flask transformed, taking on the nebula eye form it now shared with both Gordon and Jason.

"That was pretty straightforward. We'll have to wait until we're back out where I left the cloud boat before we can see how it went."

Jason touched the flask to his neck chain and it shrank back down, reattaching itself. Then he closed his eyes, which were starting to feel better, and spread his senses out over his domain.

- Initiate transfiguration of new territory Y/N?
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"Yes."