

Chapter 452

Small Mercies

Jason had made a tradition of triggering the territory transfigurations alone on his balcony, but he changed his pattern because he was unsure of what would come next. Shade's VTOL plane form was hovering just outside the pagoda entrance, blasting wind. Jason went outside to join the three vampires, Mr North and Gerling.

Standing with them, Jason closed his eyes and initiated the change. The others sensed nothing from Jason's newest and most distant territory, but Jason felt it immediately start transforming. To Gerling and the others, Jason was just standing still with his eyes closed. This continued as the remote territory took time going through the transfiguration process.

"Asano?" Gerling finally asked.

"Sorry, it's been done for a few minutes," Jason said. "I was just standing here like this to annoy you. I'm saving the world, Gerling, not ordering a coffee. Shut up and wait."

Eventually, the process reached its conclusion.

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- Your domain now encapsulates the entirety of the transformation zone and convergent astral space. You have successfully integrated and stabilised the physical and astral components of the space.
 - Your domain now abuts the dimensional membrane between the physical and the astral. Due to the damaged nature of the dimensional membrane, an astral rift has formed, allowing the intrusion of external forces.
 - To fully incorporate your domain into the physical reality without further damage to the dimensional membrane, excise the external forces maintaining the rift in order to close it.
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Jason opened his eyes. He could sense the dimensional rift at the boundary of his domain and he could sense astral entities pouring through. Most astral beings were unable to exist in a physical space, even one infused with astral energy like the domain Jason had formed from the transformation zone blended with a collapsing astral space. One that could was an astral being Jason was familiar with, although these were more powerful than the ones he had encountered in the past. His eyes snapped open.

"Let's go."

One of Jason and Shade's first interactions, before Shade had even become Jason's familiar, was Shade's warning Jason and his companions about vorger. Now Shade gave the same warning to Jason's new companions, making him want his old ones back.

"The vorger cannot exist in a true physical realm," Shade explained as the plane flew rapidly in the direction of the rift. "Until it is fully integrated with Earth, this space still contains some properties of the astral space we were all in when it formed. This is how they can exist here."

"So, why don't we integrate the place, then?" Gerling asked. "Shoving it back into Earth was the point of all this, right? Why not do that and kick these creatures out while we're at it?"

"Because something is maintaining the rift they're using to enter from the astral," Jason explained. "I can feel the rift. I can feel whatever's out there, waiting as it holds the rift open."

"Whatever?" Gerling asked.

"It's not a vorger," Jason said. "It's something else. It feels familiar, but I can't quite sense it enough to recognise."

"You said waiting," Elizabeth said. "Waiting for what?"

"For whoever defends this realm," Shade said. "It is common for astral beings that can enter semi-physical space to feed on physical beings. That energy anchors them and allows them to stay. When the vorger do this, they warp and deform flesh. If they do it enough, the person is turned into a flesh abomination, their soul forever trapped inside. They no longer control their own bodies, yet cannot pass into death unless someone kills them."

"You want to avoid them doing that," Jason said. "I've seen those abominations and you don't want to be one."

"You still haven't explained why we don't just shut it all down and end this," Gerling said.

"Because we may have stabilised the transformation space, but now we have rogue elements running around inside it," Jason said. "We have to purge them and then we can finish it and finally get out of here. After that, we can go back to trying to kill one another."

"The vorger are incorporeal," Shade warned. "Without a power that allows you to affect them, or an affinity to the astral, they can touch you while you cannot harm them in turn. They are, however, subject to spiritual forces. You all have strong auras. If you can wield them as weapons, they will be effective."

“That shouldn’t be a problem for the essence users amongst us,” Mr North said, looking at Jason and Gerling. “The rest of us have auras that are less actively controlled and more inherent to our nature.”

“You will likely be unable to make use of your auras in the appropriate manner,” Shade acknowledged. “I recommend you leverage what abilities you have as best you can.”

“I think I can help,” Gerling said. “I have a power that lets me pass off some power to others. You saw me using it to enhance my men. One of the things I can do with it is to invest you with a power that hurts ethereal stuff. It’ll shield you a little, but mostly add special damage to your physical attacks. Good for ghostly stuff and pretty good for breaking magic shields, too.”

“It’s called disruptive-force damage,” Jason said and Gerling gave him an assessing look.

“Must be nice to have a power that gives you all the answers.”

Disruptive force damage was a bane to incorporeal creatures, but Jason’s best source was Gordon, who was still awaiting a resummons. He was not concerned about the vorger personally, though, as he had many tools to fight them. His ability to make soul attacks alone was even more dangerous to them than Gordon, with the only question being if they were strong enough to endure it.

Unlike the anomalies, whose power was tied to the level of the transformation zone, these external invaders varied in rank. They were a mix of silver and gold-rank, the golds being the ones that gave Jason pause. The true threat was the entity just beyond his senses, however, due to not yet having entered his domain. He had a very bad feeling that the strain of power he sensed was diamond-rank, in which case all their efforts could easily be for naught. He did not voice this concern, since there was nothing to be done about it anyway.

Unlike the anomalies that appeared all around a territory, the vorger poured in from a single rift in the sky over Jason’s latest territory. They seemed to be no fewer in number, though, which meant that the ghost-like creatures formed a sea of translucent white, glowing faintly in the dark sky. They were eerily silent, even as they stormed out of the astral, giving them an uncanny air.

The Communist Bloc style city had transfigured into a grim city of night, with dark, narrow alleys and moonlight glistening off rain-soaked streets. Jason immediately thought

of the establishing shot of pretty much every Batman movie. It was a good environment for the vampires.

Although the vorger seemed endless, they were being rapidly annihilated by Jason and his companions. Jason was the most prominent, with any vorger coming remotely close getting annihilated by soul attacks. Even the gold-rank ones put up little fight and the area around Jason became an empty bubble in a sea of ghosts as he moved around to sweep them up.

The most prominent difference between Jason's approach and the others was that when he assaulted the vorger with soul attacks, they made a noise. Normally silent, even as the others dispersed them by various means, Jason's attacks made them let out a glass-shattering screech. Since Jason was wiping them out in job lots, the battle was punctuated by chorus bursts of ghostly death shrieks.

Gerling required more effort than Jason to disincorporate the vorger with his aura, but he quickly caught onto the means. Once he figured out how to make a powerful weapon of it, he was like a giant with a hammer smashing through them.

Mr North and Elizabeth teamed up to use their unique ritual magic variations to set up defensive rituals, reminding Jason of Clive's combat style. Mr North created a web-pattern magic diagram set out in the middle of a street. He and Elizabeth stood in the middle of it and any vorger that came near found itself entangled in a web, despite its ethereal nature.

Elizabeth in turn, set up five ritual circles around the central web diagram. From each, a nest of long red tentacles emerged to lash at the vorger. They were able to extend and snake off around corners and down alleys, as if infinite in length. They sought out the vorger, wrapped around them and squeezed, the ghostly entities popping like balloons. This proved a terror to the vorger, with only Jason's aura being more avidly avoided.

The other vampires did not fare quite as well, at least at first. Gerling's power helped, but only so much in the face of the ghost tsunami. Georges, who could take on the powers and skills of things whose blood he drank, was troubled at first because the vorger had no blood to drink. Jason changed that for him, by casting a spell. Georges learned of it when he heard the icy voice Jason reserved for enemies.

"Bleed for me."

One of the vorger in Georges' face turned from translucent white to a red mist, with the familiar, coppery scent of blood. To Georges, it smelled amazingly appetizing and he sucked it in like he was playing tricks with cigarette smoke. Georges himself became a little translucent and suddenly he could touch the vorger as if they were physical things.

Their touch was now harmless to him. Georges unleashed his inner beast, his gold-rank speed and vampiric ferocity tearing a path through the vorger.

The last vampire, Klaus, suffered the worst. Jason also made some of the vorger in front of Klaus bleed, but consuming them was not as effective. Consumption made Klaus faster and stronger, neither of which was of great help against ghosts. Even if partially inured to their attacks by the energy infused into his body by Gerling's power, Klaus was slowly warped by the touch of one creature after another.

Jason was unable to cleanse the effect with his power as the vorger's touch left behind an affliction of the magic type, which fell outside his power to dispel. This was common amongst cleansing powers, which tended to affect curses, diseases and poisons. Mostly, the kind of things Jason did to people. Magic cleansing was the purview of magic specialists like Clive, along with dedicated healers.

When the vorger made a final surge, each combatant was isolated in a final effort by the ghostly creatures to overwhelm them. A massive wave attempted to inundate Jason's aura and overwhelm it, requiring him to dig deep and push back. He weathered the powerful and costly offensive in which countless vorger perished but was left mentally drained. He felt like he was low on mana, even though he was almost fully topped off.

The vorger finally gave up and retreated, leaving only scattered stragglers behind. Jason and the others regrouped and started clearing the stragglers, aside from Klaus. They found what was left of him, transformed into a pile of formless, grotesque flesh. It was already dead.

"I believe," Shade said, emerging from Jason's shadow, "that his vampiric nature has given him the mercy of death. Vampires sustain a false life using the life force they have stolen through blood. Once he was taken too far from his vampiric state, he could no longer contain that life force and it escaped, leaving the flesh to die."

Jason crouched to take a closer look at Klaus' remains.

"I know we were ultimately enemies," he said, "but that's a rough way to go out. And rough ways to go are my bread and butter. At least his soul won't be trapped in a twisted prison of his own body."

"Small mercies." Elizabeth said as a spear plunged into Jason's back, bursting out of his chest.

"Which is more mercy than you'll get," Gerling said, leveraging the spear shaft to heighten Jason's pain. "It's time for this idiotic game of charades to end."