

Chapter 451

The Very Opposite of Fantastical

The sky was bleak, grey and sunless, reflecting the architecture of the city. The territory was another city, but the very opposite of fantastical. Uniform concrete buildings were set out in plain, hard lines, like a distillation of Soviet Bloc design.

Just as the territory was a bland version of a human city, the anomalies were a bland version of human. Identical human men in identical black suits with sixties tailoring, they were a clone army of men in black. They fought with what looked like ordinary pistols, although they packed a gold-rank punch. In close, they used a martial arts style that was fast and efficient, but robotic and predictable.

Once he had killed and drained enough to accelerate his speed, Jason was confident enough to engage them directly. Although the anomalies had gold-rank speed and strength, it was on the lower end of the scale and they lacked any exotic abilities. Jason was almost able to match them in speed and had a full host of powers to pit against them.

His cloak intercepted bullets, and while many punched through its silver-rank protection, his blood robes soaked some more of the impact. His regeneration and drain rapidly healed what damage still made it through. Jason was long past the point where even moderate injuries were a distraction.

Once he was in melee range, Jason's cloak was once again key to his defence. It hid his unconventional movement, which was made all the more deceitful by feints. As his aura told one story, his body told another while the truth was something else entirely. He was still only beginning to use his aura feints effectively, but the minds of the clone-like anomalies turned out to be as bland as their appearance. Despite the precision and efficiency of their hand-to-hand skill, their lack of improvisation and imagination made their attacks predictable and their defences vulnerable to Jason's unorthodox style.

Jason had been through thousands of enemies in hundreds of fights. His current strength was the product of battles with monsters, anomalies and the risen dead; vampires, superheroes and even other essence users. His fighting style, the Way of the Reaper, was too comprehensive to be mastered by ordinary humans.

The myriad techniques and variations of his style went beyond martial arts. Its practices dipped into gymnastics, acrobatics parkour, stealth, climbing, even sleight of hand. There were too many techniques to remember without the enhanced memory of a magically-enhanced spirit attribute. There weren't enough hours in the day for the practice required not just to master but maintain that level of skill.

Sophie and Jason both practised the Way of the Reaper, but in very different ways. Sophie came to it through training, taking a subset of the whole and building a style perfect for herself. As she moved through iron and bronze ranks she had expanded her repertoire, continuing to make the style her own without attempting to grasp the whole. She took what she needed, discarded the rest and was the stronger for it.

Emir Bahadir had studied the style more than most outsiders to the Order of the Reaper. He had hypothesised that the style was originally intended to be learned through skill books. Only then, with the skills magically imprinted, could the full style be mastered. This was his conclusion after several years of searching for remnants of the style, with dozens of subcontracted adventuring teams investigating the ruins of the fallen order.

Only through using skill books was Jason able to enjoy the level of proficiency he had obtained but . He had dedicated considerable time and work into making the style imprinted on him his own and not just a series of programmed responses, but would never have Sophie's focused mastery. While it was an important cornerstone of his combat technique, it would never be the foundation that it was for her.

Jason simply couldn't dedicate the training time Sophie could to a selected subset of techniques. He adapted to his circumstances, environments and enemies, using spells, direct combat, sneak attacks and skirmish tactics as he needed. For him, the movement and stealth techniques were just as important, if not more so, than the martial arts. The broad-spectrum learning from skill books was a good fit for him.

Sophie was so good at what she did that she would pit her skills against any opponent, trusting herself and the abilities. Jason would assess an opponent and change himself, looking for the most appropriate of his available approaches. He would even switch it up against the same enemy as they adapted to him.

Fighting the men in black anomalies, Jason began with skirmishing hit-and-run strikes while his enemies were faster than him. They roamed the city in groups of four and he took some hits along the way, but nothing he couldn't endure. He left each encounter with a slew of afflictions in his wake, letting them do their work as he moved on.

Jason's biggest setback in the fight was the inability to the affliction-spreading butterflies. The anomalies gunned down the brightly glowing, blue and orange butterflies with machine-like precision before they could do their job. The only benefit was that the butterflies exploded on being destroyed, causing an amount of disarray in the orderly anomalies that Jason could make the most of.

As anomalies started dropping from the accumulated afflictions, Jason drained them and grew faster. He started fighting more directly, matching his skills and powers against

their clockwork techniques. He took a battering at first, sometimes being forced to escape, but slowly learned what did and didn't work. The uniformity of the enemies meant that a trick that worked on one anomaly would be effective against them all as they never seemed to learn.

Ultimately, these anomalies proved to be a weak match-up against Jason. His butterfly failure aside, his specific abilities were filled with answers to the challenges they posed. Being numerous but relatively weak aside from their resilience, Jason's afflictions were able to chew through their physical fortitude. Once he caught up to them on speed, their intimidating fighting technique was something of a paper tiger while their firearms were a minimal threat.

The others all had their own approaches, staying relatively close together at first before spreading out. By separating, the anomalies were less likely to converge into larger groups and overwhelm them.

The vampires each fought using different powers, with the human-like anomalies serving as self-serving blood bags. Elizabeth was a master of luring groups into traps set out using blood rituals, fuelled by the blood on the anomalies already killed. Klaus fed on the anomalies' blood to grow stronger and faster, starting with a low gold-rank baseline and growing to dangerous levels as he fed again and again.

The final vampire, Georges, also fed on the anomalies, to a different effect. With each feeding, he became more and more like them, taking on their rigid mannerisms and clean, precise movements. He even started to look more like them, with their bland faces and rigid body language.

He started using their fighting style but, unlike them, was able to learn and innovate. He swiftly reaching the point of roundly besting them at their own game, even conjuring one of their pistols.

Todd the necromancer had already ordered his ghoulish army to move overland towards the sight of the battle before Jason had even expanded the territory. He consumed their energy rapidly but replenished their numbers by animating the dead anomalies. The zombie versions were only silver-rank and lacked their skills, but as cannon fodder and magic fuel, they got the job done.

Gerling moved with his four offsideers, using his unsealed essence ability to make them more powerful. They were not a match for the anomalies, but Gerling was. He would act as the spearhead, charging in, ignoring bullets burying themselves in his flesh. A charging punch to the gut doubled-over an anomaly, followed by a thunderous uppercut

that shot it into the air. Gerling grabbed its leg as it flew up and hammered it back down, slamming it over and over, as if shaking the dust from an old rug.

Gerling's men capitalised on his powerhouse charge attacks and used their slight numerical advantage to maximum effect. Jason even supplied them with pistols looted from the anomalies, as those picked up directly would not work for the humans.

Mr North offered roaming assistance. He used webs to set out magical rune traps to complement Elizabeth's. He bound anomalies in webs to help Gerling and his team when they struggled. He even took his true form of a car-sized spider from time to time, draining the anomalies of blood with the enthusiasm of the vampires.

So long as Jason didn't retreat into his inner territories, the anomalies entering from the exterior of the domain would make their way around the ring-shaped territory in pursuit of him. Going back to the first abnormal transformation zone, Jason had discovered that unless he retreated to his domain's inner territories, the anomalies would not invade there.

The latest territory was huge, being the outer ring of Jason's entire domain, and the fighting seemed endless. The essence users consumed spirit coins to maintain their energy, while the gold-rank blood of the anomalies was a feast for the vampires, possibly due to their human form. Even so, after a dozen hours with no end not in sight, the group started to flag. Of them all, only Jason was used to the ceaseless fighting.

Jason had cleared out entire proto-spaces alone or with Farrah. During the monster waves he had fought for days on end in Broken Hill and Makassar, and clearing vast territories, full of anomalies, was familiar to him now. He also didn't need to rest for anything but mental exhaustion, able to replenish his stamina and mana at need by draining anomalies. He also didn't need to stop and let his recovery attribute heal his injuries. The closest they had to a healer was the necromancer, but his sinister life exchange powers were sealed and useless.

The vampires had never faced armies of monsters, and Gerling had always been tactically deployed by the Network. Mr North was both literally and figuratively a spider in the centre of his web, rarely taking direct action.

Oddly, it was the weakest members of the group who held up the best. Todd was relatively safe behind a wall of ghouls and felt less of the strain. Gerling's henchmen had participated extensively in both proto-space and monster wave clearing, with two of them having even fought at Makassar. This gave them similar experiences with endurance battles to Jason.

Jason had Shade helicopter everyone but himself to the closest inner territory, while he remained behind. As the holder of the domain, the anomalies would not move inward so long as he didn't either.

It took days of constant fighting before the territory was fully claimed and the greater anomaly appeared. Jason had been hoping for a UFO or a mothman, but it turned out to be a single, normal-sized man in black. His face was identical to the others, but his suit was of a more contemporary cut, compared to the sixties styling of the others.

The subsequent fight turned out to be the greatest struggle the group had faced in all their time in the transformation zone. The anomaly wasn't especially powerful in and of itself. It was stronger and faster than the normal anomalies, but only at a low-mid gold-rank level. The problems it posed Jason and his team were twofold.

The first was that it possessed a dazzling array of miniaturised high-tech devices. These ranged from a powerful energy pistol blasting heat and kinetic energy, a force field projector and even a short-range teleporter. These were the primary tools at the anomaly's disposal, although far from the only ones.

"Was that a shoe laser?" Jason asked. "Is it bad that I kind of want him to win?"

"Shut up, Asano!" Gerling roared.

There was also a discreet jump pack on its back, to which was attached several small, disposable devices with powerful effects. A tube containing a small rocket killed one of Gerling's henchmen and severely injured the others, taking them out of the fight.

The second problem posed by the greater anomaly was that it wasn't as mentally limited as its lesser cousins. It was able to innovate and adapting to Jason and the others over the course of the fight.

Disaster struck when the anomaly charged up its pistol, teleported next to Todd and fired directly into his head, killing him. This put the pistol into some kind of charging cycle but the group couldn't take advantage as the now uncontrolled ghouls went into a frenzy. They only escaped due to the vampires managing to control at least a portion of the ghouls and they were forced to retreat. They were forced to leave Gerling's companions behind, who were inundated by the ghouls.

Away from the greater anomaly, Jason handled the bulk of the ghouls with the doom butterflies that swiftly spread to annihilate the weak ghouls. By the time he was done, the greater anomaly had tracked them down and the butterflies swarmed it. It destroyed them with some kind of rocket but the resulting explosion massively weakened its force field, putting Jason and the others on the front foot as the battle resumed.

In the end, it was the advantage in numbers that allowed them to kill it. Gordon's disruptive-force beams helped further weaken the force field. Mr North and Elizabeth set down traps they lured it into. By the time it was dead, every one of the survivors had taken severe damage. Jason's familiar, Gordon, had his vessel destroyed by the anomaly attempting to preserve its force field. This was a blow to Jason, who lacked the considerably rare materials to resummon him.

They all healed rapidly, the anomaly containing more than enough energy for both the vampires to feed on and to fuel Jason's blood harvest spell. Gerling was the slowest to recover, relying only on his gold-rank recovery attribute, yet that was far from slow. His arm was blackened and almost torn off after suffering multiple hit's from the anomaly's energy pistol, yet was back to normal by the time they returned to the pagoda.

The survivors were in the mid-level suites in the pagoda, recovering from days of combat. Gerling had lost half of his people and Jason had lost a familiar, albeit temporarily. They had agreed to a full day of rest before taking the next step.

Jason wasn't going to risk transfiguring his new domain until they were ready for whatever came after, unsure what would happen once he completed his domain. Strangely, the distant shapes in the gloom seemed no closer than before, despite Jason having expanded into almost every territory. He did not estimate there to be more than one or two left at most.

Would there be some terrible, astral guardian in the final territory? Were the shapes in the gloom echoes of astral beings that would never be seen and pose no threat? Jason was hoping for that one more than he was expecting it.

There was still the remnants of a ghoul army running loose, although they were weak, scattered and uncontrolled. Until Jason resolved the transformation zone and reintegrated his domain with Earth, he would be unable to trigger the defences and eliminate them.

After warning the others that they should take the time to mentally prepare to face unknown challenges, Jason spent the day in meditation, readying himself for whatever was to come.