

Chapter 401

It's Okay to Laugh

Jason, Dawn and Farrah looked at the burned, drained remains of the vampire lord Willoughby.

"I still don't like the risk you took draining him," Farrah said. "Now that it's done, though, at least one of us has a path to advancement."

Since reaching silver-rank, Jason and Farrah had both reached the limits of their early-stage growth spurt. Pushing into the mid and late stages of silver rank would be difficult so long as they remained on Earth. At lower ranks, confronting higher-rank monsters was a path to rapid advancement that Jason especially had taken advantage of, but that was less viable at silver.

Gold rank monsters were too powerful to casually confront, even for elite essence users. More well-rounded and with fewer exploitable weaknesses, many were even more dangerous than less-competent essence users of equivalent rank. Without a solid team of elites, going after gold-rank monsters was too risky.

The traditional path to gold involved confronting many silver-rank monsters, ideally those who could pose a greater challenge than average. Gold-rank proto-spaces could offer silver-rank monsters in large numbers and had started to sporadically appear, but not often enough.

Jason and Farrah would need to monopolise those spaces, which they didn't have time for, even if they didn't have to compete with the Network's strongest forces. After Makassar, even the fight over reality cores wasn't enough to distract the Network from descending on any gold-rank space with enough magically enhanced heavy ordnance to level a small town.

For these reasons, Jason and Farrah had given up on growing their power further until they returned to Farrah's world. The revelation that Jason could advance by treating vampires as monster cores gave Jason, at least, a means of advancement.

The biggest advantage of monster core advancement was that cores could be absorbed in larger quantities and slowly processed, compared to the constant need to seek out dangerous conflict. If Jason really could treat vampires like monster cores, then periodically hunting a few vampires before returning to the task at hand could pay off in half a year or so when his abilities grew stronger. Just ten or twenty percent further into silver rank would be a welcome jump in strength.

That did not mean they were about to go off looking for every vampire they could. Dawn and Farrah's victory was hard-fought, even with Dawn's diamond-rank experience and peak silver-rank power. They had the advantage of numbers and a lot of fire abilities, while the vampire's powers played little part. Other vampires would be stronger, which would make a hard fight even with the addition of Jason.

"We shouldn't go out of our way looking for vampires," Jason said. "We have our objective and I have a feeling that we'll be running into them one way or another."

"Agreed," Dawn said. "I believe that future encounters are inevitable, if only because we are unwilling to conscience their behaviour."

"Mr Asano," Shade said, one of his bodies emerging from Jason's shadow.

"Yes?" Jason asked.

"The ritual effect in the palace has ended," Shade said. "They're gone."

Jason bowed his head, his lips pressed tightly together. After a moment, he nodded. The only three bodies of Shade's that Jason hadn't brought into battle were the ones being possessed by Kaito, Asya and Greg.

"Thank you, Shade. And thank your dad, when you get the chance."

"The Reaper will not care," Shade said.

"I'd appreciate you doing it anyway."

Koen Waters, Annabeth Tilden and a tactical team were standing on the eighth floor of the Network building, standing next to a neatly circular hole in the floor, some two metres across. It descended through the building, all the way down to the lobby.

"What do we do about the hole?" Koen asked.

"For now," Anna said, "we hope it didn't take out anything structurally necessary."

Anna's presence was the main reason for the security team since the ghouls had been eliminated and the surviving Cabal members had fled. A handful of ethereal blue and orange butterflies drifted up from the hole before dropping back down. They were overtly magical, with a glow to their vibrant colouration. There had previously been far more of the butterflies swarming the floors and reducing the ghouls to drained husks that were now scattered all through the building.

"How many dead?" Anna asked.

"We've only done eyeball estimates but we're looking at maybe two-hundred. Maybe more."

"That many?"

“We had a lot of staff on-site with the extra shifts we’ve been running,” Koen said. “We managed to evacuate a lot of them upstairs but then there were the police and military. The Cabal killed quite a lot of them before they all pulled back, and the vampire animated them all.”

“Do we know where the vampire is? Or Asano? I’m assuming one killed the other.”

“We think they fought on the third floor. Asano was brief when we encountered him and he told us about recovering our people and hiding them. The fight seems to be over because we can’t feel either aura, so I’ve sent a section to check it out.”

“How are we doing on getting those people back?”

“Our sweeper teams have found them and are bringing them up as we speak.”

“Good,” Anna said. “After what happened, we need to subject them to every medical test and magical healing known to humankind.”

Koen’s second-in-command, Manesh, was watching the hole and spoke up.

“Ditto, we have movement.”

Koen went to look over the edge of the hole and then took several steps back as a dark figure swept up through the hole and landed in front of him. Jason arrived on dark wings, Dawn and Farrah quickly following with their wings of flame.

“G’day, Koen, Anna,” Jason greeted as he pushed the hood of his cloak back. “Did you find all your people?”

“You beat the vampire?”

“No, the ladies were the stars of that show while I played ghoulish janitor. Did you find your people I stashed away?”

“We’re bringing them back now,” Koen said. “Thank you for stepping in, especially after how our organisation has treated you.”

“No worries.”

“Thank you,” Anna echoed while looking curiously at Dawn.

“Last time I saw you,” Anna told her, “you were normal rank.”

“Coming back from the dead more powerful than ever is kind of our thing,” Jason said. “How are you going to respond to the Cabal’s attack?”

Anna glowered.

“We lost a lot of people,” she said. “Your intervention prevented the loss of many critical personnel, so our ability to respond to proto-spaces is undiminished. Step one is to recover any isolated survivors while making sure we can still do our job. Protecting the country from proto-spaces and preventing monster waves is the first priority.”

Jason nodded his approval.

"What we've lost," Anna continued, "is a huge portion of the administrative staff that allows an organisation as large as ours to function. A lot of our people died today and step two is counting the dead and securing our magical infrastructure. Also making sure that the hole in the middle of our building won't cause it to collapse."

"Maybe we can look at it as an opportunity," Koen's second, Manesh said.

"What do mean?" Anna asked.

"You could install an epic fireman's pole."

"Manesh, a lot of people just died," Anna said.

"Seriously, mate," Jason said. "I love a fireman's pole as much as the next bloke, but time and place."

"This coming from you," Farrah said.

"So, what's step three?" Jason asked Anna, forcibly changing the subject.

"After we make sure we're operational, it's time to clean house properly. I'm going to dissolve the steering committee and take charge personally."

"You can do that?" Farrah asked.

"She has the support of the tactical department," Koen said.

"Getting blindsided like this shouldn't have happened," Anna said. "It would take someone at the steering committee level to poke just the right holes in our security net without being noticed. We've been worried about the committee for a while, with some throwing in with the leadership faction and now others selling us out to the Cabal. The International Committee has already fractured, take in those local IC people who went against the leadership and restructure."

"That's bold," Farrah said."

"We're also going to work with some of the Cabal that split off because they don't want to work with the old vampires," Anna said. "Craig Vermillion is running his own splinter faction. Between us, him and the EOA members that left, back when they realised their group caused the monster waves, we're talking about a whole new group, with members from every major magical faction."

"That's oddly optimistic, in the middle of all this mess," Jason said. "Are there any more old vampires in Australia?"

"No," Koen said. "He came over with the earliest colonial forces. My family has been part of what is now the Network since long before they arrived. I have family records of his being a menace until he grew too strong and went into hibernation."

Koen Waters was an Aboriginal Australian. Jason was startled to hear that the network predated colonisation and curious as to how that worked given Australia's history of violence and oppression to the indigenous population, but it was far from the time.

"Our contacts in the parts of the Cabal not on team ancient vampire confirm that this vampire was the only one in Australia," Anna said. "We're low priority compared to Asia and North America, but Europe has the strongest concentration, though. The southern hemisphere is mostly free of them, with the biggest concentration in South America."

"Small mercies," Jason said. "How are you going to respond to the Cabal?"

"It's too early to say," Anna said. "They declared war today and hitting hard while they're on the back foot has emotional appeal, but as I said, our priority has to be preventing monster waves."

"The transformation events are bad enough," Koen said.

"We're certainly going to stop fighting over reality cores, now," Anna said. "I suspect the Cabal will too, at least for the immediacy. The EOA have been the poor cousins in that fight but it looks like the door may be open for them now, at least for a while."

"Great," Jason said. "They're using the cores to create boost injections, allowing their superheroes to juice up to gold-rank temporarily."

"We know," Anna said. "We all saw your encounter with the EOA in Venezuela."

"You killed them with your brain," Manesh said. "It was scary as shi—"

He stopped talking at a glare from Koen.

"So, what about you?" Anna asked. "You never used that information I gave you."

"Too much risk," Jason said. "Too many variables. That's why no one else was willing to take a shot, right?"

"We thought you might be willing to try."

"I almost did," Jason said. "You gave it to me at my brother's funeral. Made me feel like I have to or I'm letting him down. Kind of a prick move."

"I'm sorry," Anna said.

"No you're not," Jason said. "I don't have to read your emotions to know that, although I can. It's time for us to go."

"Wait," Anna said. "I think Vermillion will want to contact you, once he knows you're in the country," Anna said. "Are you still using a phone or did you ditch it?"

"I've still got my phone," Jason said. "The anti-tracking magic makes the roaming charges worse, somehow, but I still have about five million bucks left. I sank most of the cash from that gold you helped me flog off into building Asano village but I stopped paying attention to money a while back."

Anna took a notepad and pen from her jacket, scribbled a number down, tore out the page and handed it to Jason.

“Vermillion’s burner.”

“Thanks.”

A portal opened on the tower rooftop at the centre of Jason’s cloud palace. Jason, Farrah and Dawn stepped through and Jason wandered to the balustrade, looking out over the ocean.

“They’re gone,” he said as Farrah moved up beside him.

“Yeah,” Farrah said. “You alright?”

“I am,” he said. “I’m kind of annoyed that they used their final message to the living to tell me to get over myself.”

Jason and Farrah shared a look and started laughing.

“I don’t know,” Jason said. “I feel lighter, somehow. Getting to say goodbye. Maybe it’s okay to laugh when you can, even in the dark days.”

“I think that might be when it’s most important,” Farrah said.

Jason went and found all the people he had brought to his cloud palace, left somewhat at a loss by his departure. Some had gone off to explore the palace, although most remained in the hall where the ritual had been conducted. He rounded everyone up and then portalled them back to Asano Village before putting the cloud palace back in its flask.

The families of Greg and Asya were no longer as contentious towards Jason. That wasn’t the same as forgiveness but they’d been admonished by their dead loved ones and saw the magnitude of Jason’s resources. It was one thing to see him on the news and another to experience it for themselves. Between the portal, the cloud palace and the ability to call up the dead, they realised that some fights weren’t worth picking.

Once all the people were sent home, Jason wanted to leave before his presence called trouble down on Asano Village. Before that, though, he called Vermillion on the number Anna gave him.

“Oh, hey,” Vermillion said, sounding distracted. Jason could hear the roar of a car engine in the background.

“You sound busy,” Jason said.

“Little bit,” Craig said. “Didn’t want to miss you, though.”

“Anna gave me your number. Said you might want to hear from me.”

“Definitely.”

The sound of gunfire came through the phone.

“You aren’t playing a video game, are you?” Jason asked.

“Uh, no, I’m not,” Craig said. “I don’t suppose you’re anywhere near Sydney?”