

## Chapter 398

### Treachery or Cowardice

Nigel and his nine-person tactical section were retreating down a hallway on the fourth floor of the Network building. They had rushed downstairs in response to the Cabal's attack, only to encounter the people of the lower floors coming up, transformed into ravening ghouls. Undead monstrosities with a frenzied hunger for living flesh, they poured up the corridor like a wave, ignoring the gunfire slamming into them.

Becoming the undead had turned normal people into silver-rank creatures; far less powerful than even a weak silver-rank monster but still resistant to the attacks of bronze-rankers. The vampire lord knew this, so was surprised that the outnumbered tactical teams weren't immediately overrun.

Nigel's tactical team retreated in good order, despite only two members being silver-rank. Nigel had been the tactical instructor for the Sydney branch prior to Farrah's arrival and had worked with her to develop a retraining program for existing tactical teams while Farrah focused on new recruits. Nigel's own team used a mixture of traditional Network methodology and Farrah's more ability-centric approach to good effect. They had come a long way since they escorted Jason into his first proto-space.

Their discipline leveraged their capabilities effectively, with Jonno and Nigel himself laying down fire from conjured assault rifles as they fell back. Thorny had grown an extra pair of arms and was firing four conjured pistols while Digit was sending arrows downrange that exploded in blasts of fire and electricity.

Even with the gunfire laying waste to them, the ghouls kept coming. They wore the business attire of lower floor admin staff, with police and military uniforms mixed amongst them. The vampire lord had performed mass transformations on the dead killed by the Cabal, which was not limited to the Network staff. The police and military had been sent in as a response to the Cabal's brazen attack in the heart of Sydney, only to pay a deadly price at the hands of the vampire lord.

Nigel knew at least one of the teams that rushed down from the upper floors had been overrun. As his team had been pulling back in the face of a ghoulish wave, he had glimpsed the ancient vampire biting into the neck of another team's section leader and none of the team were responsive to radio checks. As far as Nigel knew, essence users couldn't be turned into ghouls but he was worried they could be turned into something worse.

The ghouls broke past the gunfire, rushing Nigel's team. The team stopped firing and Cobbo dashed forward from the backline to meet them. He wasn't running but hurtling through the air, his spear set like a jousting lance. It plunged into a ghoul and Cobbo's magically enhanced momentum stopped dead. The momentum all transferred into the ghoul, who was sent tumbling back into the others before exploding, ripping apart the closest ghouls and scattering the rest. It gave Nigel's team a reprieve as Cobbo fell back and the shooters resumed fire at the ghouls.

They continued withdrawing to the stairwell, the elevators having been shut off to prevent the Cabal using them. The next time the ghouls drew close, Jonno dropped his conjured rifle and called up a comically large rotary cannon that mowed down the ghouls, ripped apart the wall behind them and shattered the glass on the exterior wall beyond. More of the seemingly endless ghouls came streaming into the hall, unintimidated by Jonno's absurd display of power.

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"I'm glad to see you changed your mind, Frank," Vermillion said, shaking Franklin's hand. They were standing under a bridge, away from prying eyes.

"It was changed for me," Franklin said. "I should have listened to you, Craig."

"It may be for the best you didn't," Vermillion said. "Now we now your idiot ancient one pulled everyone off the storage facility to go attack the Network."

"Not everyone," Franklin said. "We're going to have to fight our way in and out. It's our own people, Craig."

"I know. But it's the only time security will be light enough for that to even be possible," Vermillion said.

"Yeah," Franklin said, resignation in his voice. "We need to go now. Our window is small."

"Alright," Vermillion said. "Let's go."

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Due to the propensity of proto-spaces and transformation events, five full tactical teams had been on standby in the building's upper floors and had moved down to confront the Cabal attack. Without the magical interference of a dimensional space or transformation zone, comms were working perfectly and the teams were able to coordinate.

Unfortunately, they arrived downstairs into the midst of chaos. The vampire lord had transformed an alarming number of the dead into ghouls and the cabal was using them as

cannon fodder. They refrained from engaging the Network teams, who they let exhaust themselves against the ghouls.

The Network's Director of Tactical Operations, who the tactical teams called the Ditto, was Koen Waters. He had ordered the teams to make a slow withdrawal back upstairs, giving the people on the floors above time to reach the magical defences of the Building's uppermost floors.

One of the five network teams was hit by the vampire himself and wiped out, while another lost cohesion and were broken up by the encroaching ghoul horde. The silver-rank section leader fell back with a couple of team members as the others were cut off, either caught by the Cabal or the ghouls or managing to escape. Some shot holes in the exterior windows, the bronze-rankers willing to risk a four-storey drop over facing the wave of undead.

The remaining three teams, including Nigel's, successfully reached different stairwells around the building. They were all on the fourth floor and worked to secure the stairwell entrances before moving up. In the case of Nigel's team, this meant Darce hurriedly summoning her steam golem to serve as a bulwark for the door. As she did that, Orange crouched down and put his hands on the top stair leading down, using his ability to weaken materials on the stairs below.

When Orange was done, he stood up and Nigel gave him an inquisitive look.

"What?" Orange asked in his abrasive bogan drawl.

"Why didn't the stairs collapse?" Nigel asked.

"The stairs will seem fine until a few of them get on there," Orange said. "Then they'll collapse and drop those undead buggers like sacks of sh—"

"We get the idea," Nigel said. "Good job."

Leaving behind the trapped stairs and the large summoned entity made of what looked like brass, they made their way up as Nigel reported in over the radio.

"Ditto, we've secured the East stairwell as best we can at level four and are moving up."

"Evac of floors five through eight is proceeding smoothly," Koen responded.

"Converge on the ninth floor armoury; that will be our first fixed defence point."

The ninth floor was where the Network's emplaced magic defences began and their magical resources were stored. It was the place where the Network could best leverage their advantages to repel attackers. The only reason the tactical teams had descended from there was to protect as many people from the lower floors as they could.

The team continued moving up. The stairwell was located on the building exterior and had glass on one side, allowing the team to look out at what was happening on the ground as they ascended. After the Cabal's open assault on a building in the Sydney CBD, authorities had intervened, cordoning off a large area around the building. The team saw where the cordon had been pulled back and expanded after an unsuccessful clash with Cabal forces.

"Since when do you have the level of fine control with your abilities to trap the stairs, Orange?" Digit asked as they double-timed up the stairs.

"I'm gettin' good at me powers," Orange said. "I've been practising like Instructor Hot Stuff taught us."

"You're a pig, Orange," Darce said.

"I only call her that because of her volcano powers," Orange said. "Do I also want to bang her like a drum? Yes, I do, but I'm a gentleman."

"So that's the secret to having you put in the effort," Digit said. "Have a beautiful woman to tell you to."

"Mate, that's no bloody secret," Orange said. "Send a pretty girl my way and you can get me to do whatever you... oh, bloody hell."

Each member of Nigel's section was keeping their head on a swivel and spotted the danger together. People with grotesquely elongated limbs were climbing up the exterior of building, their bare hands and feet adhering to the glass.

"The outside of the building is pretty reflective, right?" Darce asked. "Do they even know we're in here?"

Nigel raised his rifle and aimed at the window.

"They're about to."

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"My ghouls should have overrun this place by now," Willoughby complained. "What is taking so long?"

"Again, Lord Willoughby, it's the essence magicians. They're far more powerful than they were in your time."

"This is my time, now. Who even are you? Where's my manservant?"

"I'm Richard, my lord. No one has been able to find Franklin since we arrived."

"Treachery or cowardice," Willoughby spat. "Either way, drag him in front of me the moment he's found."

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Jason, Farrah and Dawn emerged on top of a tall building in the Sydney CBD, close to the Network building. Jason had first visited that rooftop to observe the building while still feeling out the Network, during his first days back on Earth. After getting their attention with his hospital faith healer stunt he had Shade follow the people who had arrived to investigate. That had led him to this rooftop.

They were surprised to find they were not alone on the rooftop, finding an army sniper team. Jason was worried about what their reaction would be until he felt a flood of relief from the soldiers.

"You're Jason Asano," one of them said.

"I'm wearing his underwear, so I hope so," Jason said.

"Thank god you're here."

"Aren't you meant to try and take me into custody or something?"

"Bugger that," the soldier said. "There's something down there. Something bad. It's killing people and turning them into some kind of fast zombie."

"Ghouls," Dawn said. "That will be people without magic that he's transformed. They're already dead and we can't do anything for them now but give them peace. It's the essence users we need to concern ourselves with. If he takes them alive, he can turn them."

"I fought a monster called a blood weaver," Jason said. "It vamped people up but they could be cleansed if you got to them quickly enough."

"Lesser vampires," Dawn said. "You will be able to do the same here. The curse can warp the body and mind but not the soul, unless the soul surrenders to it. If you can get to them before the curse fully claims the body, they can be saved. Once their bodies have gone from living to undead, we can only put them down with the ghouls."

"How long do we have?" Jason asked.

"Hours," Dawn said. "If we act now, we should comfortably be in time. You just have to avoid getting killed while you work, but at least the curse will negate their essence abilities. You go through the building, finding and cleansing the lesser vampires. You will likely have to fight through ghouls and the Cabal to do it."

"We go after the head vampire," Farrah said.

"Yes," Dawn agreed. "I'm confident that I can outfight it but even with fire powers to impede its healing I can't deal enough damage to kill a gold-ranker. That will be your job, Farrah. I'll set up the strikes and you hit with maximum efficiency."

"Alright," Farrah said.

The trio moved to the edge of the roof and surveyed the area. The military and police cordon was keeping people away, while the street in front of the building was strewn with blood and destroyed cars. There were only a handful of bodies, the ones too damaged to be worth turning into ghouls. There were holes in the building's glass exterior. As for the inside of the building, both Dawn and Jason had aura senses powerful enough to examine the interior.

"Ghouls and the Cabal have the first three floors and most of the fourth," Jason said. "It looks like the Network is moving its people to the upper floors where they have magical defences in place."

"There's an armoury on level nine," Farrah said, knowing the building much better than Jason. "They'll set up their first proper defensive line there."

"Then that's where I'll go," Jason said. "I'll start at the bottom and make my way up. They're using the ghouls as meat shields so I can hopefully catch the vamp minions from behind."

"We'll go straight for the old vampire," Dawn said. "The Network will fare better if we can keep him out of the fight."

"The aura those ghouls are throwing off is very feral," Jason said. "The vampire has enough control to stop the ghouls going after the Cabal?"

"From how quickly he created them all," Dawn said, "he is likely from a bloodline that specialises in creating servitors. That is good for us because that kind of bloodline is weaker in direct confrontations."

"How would I do against one of these vampires?" Jason asked.

"Your blood abilities won't be as effective on a gold rank one as those of your rank and lower," Dawn said. "Your powers that impair resistances and ignore rank disparity means your blood magic will still be an advantage but don't underestimate the vampire. Their attributes are similar to an essence user of their rank and they all have different blood powers, based on their vampiric bloodlines."

"How would you rate my chances?" Jason asked.

"If you used a vampire's minions to grow stronger before confronting a solitary vampire, you would most likely win. Without enhancing yourself, or against numbers, I would be far less optimistic."

"So I need to pick my battles," Jason said. "That's nothing new."

Jason had several means of stealing the strength of his enemies. He was able to stack health through various drain powers and if he had enough dead enemies he could compensate for the most dangerous disparity with gold-rankers, which was speed.

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Ability: [Blood Harvest] (Blood)

- Spell (drain).
- Base cost: Low mana.
- Cooldown: None.
  
- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).
  
- Effect (iron): Drain the remnant life force of a recently deceased body, replenishing health, stamina and mana. Only affects targets with blood.
  
- Effect (bronze): Affects any number of bodies in a wide area.
  
- Effect (silver): Gain an instance of [Blood Frenzy] for each corpse drained, up to a threshold determined by current rank. After reaching the threshold, gain instances of [Blood of the Immortal] instead.
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- [Blood Frenzy] (boon, unholy, stacking): Bonus to [Speed] and [Recovery]. Additional instances have a cumulative effect, up to a maximum threshold.
  
- [Blood of the Immortal] (boon, healing, unholy, stacking): On suffering damage, an instance is consumed to grant a powerful but short-lived heal-over-time effect. Additional instances can be accumulated but do not have a cumulative effect.

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From the beginning, Blood Harvest had been Jason's strongest recovery power, used to replenish himself after defeating enemies. Now it had a new purpose as a trump card for facing higher-rank foes. If he had the chance to eliminate enough lower-rank enemies first, he could compensate for a gold-ranker's speed by enhancing his own. He still wouldn't be able to match a gold-ranker, at least until he was much further into silver rank himself, but it would be enough to keep him from being wildly outclassed.

Jason, Farrah and Dawn leapt off the edge of the building, each sprouting wings. Jason, in the middle, had wings of night formed from the cloak he conjured around himself. To each side of him were women with wings of fire, gliding in formation towards the Network building.