

## Chapter 357

### Broken

One of the best-known locations in the Australian outback, Broken Hill was a carefully chosen target. Its rich history and iconic desert landscapes had woven it into the fabric of Australia's soul. It was also one of the centres to which isolated people from across that region of the outback had been gathered, exploding the population from less than twenty thousand to almost thirty-five thousand.

The Network presence was minimal, with only a single tactical section to protect the support team whose core duty was to check for dimensional incursions. With resources stretched thin, only when a dimensional space was detected would a substantive force be brought in.

The personnel in charge of organising the massive influx of people were regular civil servants, military logistics specialists and no small number of volunteers. There were builders knocking up prefab domiciles and companies donating materials, tools and machinery. Like in other safe zones being set up around the world, people were coming out to show how many were willing to step up and help one another.

Major population centres around the world were being turned into military green zones, while the most rural areas were being abandoned. Broken Hill fell somewhere in the middle, having been placed under Network protection but with only a fraction of the resources allocated to a major city.

The Network had become known to the public as the Global Defense Network in the weeks since the monster waves began, the terrorist readiness exercises claimed as preparation for the worst-case scenario now being faced. The sympathetic portion of the media referred to the 'supernatural task forces' the GDN fielded as the government response to an unimaginable threat. Their practicality and professionalism were intended to instil confidence but this was continually being upstaged by the flashy antics and expert media manipulation of the EOA's League of Heroes.

The EOA's agenda of positioning themselves as a top power player that matched or even eclipsed the Network was built around taking a leading position in responding to the monster waves. This involved a two-pronged attack of raising themselves up as they simultaneously tore the Network down.

The EOA's goal wasn't to convince the governments of the world that they were better than the Network. The governments knew full well that the Network's power, resources and reach easily outstripped the EOA. The EOA's goal was to swing public

sentiment so ferociously in their direction that the governments were forced to give the EOA a seat at the table, shifting support, resources and influence away from the Network.

Various targets around the globe were selected to further this purpose and Broken Hill fit their criteria perfectly. It was under Network protection, but with minimal Network presence. They had a support team to scan for proto-spaces and a nine-person tactical section to protect them. Otherwise, Broken Hill was staffed by regular military, civil servants and volunteers.

In addition, Broken Hill was geographically isolated in a very large nation where the Network had limited magical transport options. These factors tallied up to make Broken Hill a soft target for the EOA's plan. If the Network suffered a catastrophic failure in one of their supposed safe zones, only for the League of Heroes to step in, it would be a major blow to the Network. If it repeatedly happened worldwide, it went from a major blow to a crippling one.

While the network had been scrambling to save as many people as possible, the EOA had been choosing their targets and carefully infiltrating them. The EOA's 'League of Heroes' was the right hand distracting the audience, their clandestine operations were the left hand performing the trick. The volunteer staff and even the military personnel stationed at Broken Hill had no shortage of EOA plants.

The infiltrators in Broken Hill were meticulous and patient. The government and Network personnel were more wary of panic amongst the population than sabotage, leaving the EOA's people safely undetected. Not even Jason, briefly passing through, had picked out their duplicitous emotions amongst the tens of thousands in the overstuffed town.

The EOA played their roles well, not jumping at the first proto-space detected in the region. Earnest volunteers, they worked as hard as anyone to support the team that arrived to intercept the monster wave. It even included the famous Starlight Rider, tearing across the desert on a motorcycle, his cloak of stars flying behind him.

They would only get a single shot and the EOA waited for the right proto-space, lucking out perfectly when one appeared right on top of Broken Hill itself. It was then that the EOA struck. Communications were taken over and the tactical section ambushed and eliminated, as was any military personnel not already suborned. Black-clad paramilitary soldiers swept in from the desert on trucks to contain the town, claiming to be government reinforcements.

The civil and civilian camp workers were not taken in by the obvious lie but were forced to go along by the lack of outside contact and large number of armed soldiers. They

made various attempts to get word out but every phone line was cut and every signal jammed.

In the general chaos of the monster waves, it took a day before the Network realised that Broken Hill had become unreachable. They sent an emergency investigation team who managed to scout out the situation and get word back that someone had taken control of Broken Hill, but it was already too late. The EOA had stalled long enough for the proto-space to start disgorging monsters onto the town in flashes of rainbow light.

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Kaito's helicopter flew directly inland at a pace no ordinary helicopter could match. Other teams were approaching Broken Hill from Adelaide, which was closer than Sydney but Kaito would still beat them onsite. Jason and one of Sydney's strongest tactical sections were in the back, the mood sombre. Everyone on board was concerned for the tens of thousands of people they feared being too late to help.

The back section of the helicopter was in a utilitarian configuration with simple chairs for the soldiers to strap into. Jason sat with them, no one uttering a sound. Jason handed out spirit coins, none of them having eaten actual food in weeks. With the status of agricultural areas ranging from under threat to evacuated to under attack, food shortages were already becoming a factor and essence users were all under direction to live exclusively on spirit coins.

It was a small drop in the bucket compared to the food needs of the population at large but every bit would help in what could be a long and harrowing ordeal. The regular consumption of coins would also help the essence users stay fresh and ready for their continuing struggles.

The obvious drawback was the increased need for coins, so China and the US opened up their vaults to keep other parts of the world supplied. France was also contributing, having converted the permanent astral space in Saint-Étienne to a dedicated spirit coin farm. There had been a lot of awkwardness when Farrah had arrived to help them set it up during Jason's sojourn, even with the original Lyon branch members having been replaced by the International Committee.

Jason was likewise pumping out as many coins as he could manage. When finding and shutting down proto-spaces before they could pop, he was taking the time to wipe out any lower-rank monsters he could quickly knock over for the loot. In this, Gordon's sweeping beams were the most effective and the familiar was closing in on his next rank. Jason was still short on the resources required to resummon him, though, but it was hardly the time to be seeking them out.

A wall panel slid open to reveal a screen and Greg's voice came through a speaker.

"Communications just opened with Broken Hill but our people aren't responding. What is coming out is a live news transmission."

The screen blinked to life, showing camera footage of a street filled with chaos, apparently shot by a reporter hiding inside a heavily damaged building. It was far from the only one, some buildings showing collapsed walls while others were on fire, sending up plumes of black smoke. Corpses lay bloody and burned in the street and screams of pain and fear filled the air.

In the middle of the street, a colourfully-dressed man with steel gauntlets was trading blows with a rock monster that had a glowing red gem in its chest. The monster had the edge in strength but the superhero was faster, hammering steel-clad fists on the stone body of the monster. It was a long way from an essence-user fight, at least one Jason or Farrah would be involved in it. No powers were on display, just two supernatural beings pounding away at each other.

As they fought, the reporter's commentary came through.

"...government's unpopular reliance on the so-called Global Defence Network has led to tragedy here in Broken Hill. Claimed as a safe zone, all they accomplished was luring people to their deaths. If not for the rapid intercession of a League of Heroes team, this reporter would already be counted amongst the dead..."

There were actual snarls in the helicopter as people who had thrown everything they had into protecting the populace were badmouthed even as innocents died. Jason opened his map ability, watching the kilometres tick down. Kaito was downing mana potions as quickly as he could while pushing the helicopter to its limits with his abilities, yet their speed felt excruciatingly slow.

With his eyes on the map, Jason felt it as he crossed the distance threshold he needed. His current portal range was four hundred kilometres, and once they got that close to Broken Hill he released his safety belt as he stood up.

The others knew from the briefing that Jason would be heading out alone. He wasn't taking anyone else because he couldn't portal the silver-rankers, which was a good part of the elite section, and he wouldn't take the bronze-rankers and isolate them from the team.

They were quietly glad, as for all their specialist training, they would not plunge into a high-grade monster wave with just their small group. The Adelaide teams would arrive not far behind them for a joint operation.

The side door opened, the influx of air at their incredible speed causing the helicopter to lurch. Jason kept his feet by gripping the seat belt he had just removed and then flung

himself out the door. Gliding towards the ground, he spotted a pleasant enough spot running alongside a creek and rapidly descended there before opening a portal arch and stepping through.

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The EOA's superhero program involved all their latest breakthroughs in human enhancement. Their bones were engraved with magic sigils in a series of deeply invasive surgeries. Their flesh was treated and retreated with alchemical baths, deep-tissue injections and magical radiation therapy. Their blood was drawn out and magically altered using modified dialysis machines.

The body modifications were only a part of the procedure, as without similar changes to the soul the massive bodily augmentations could not be handled by the subjects. Volunteers to the program were subjected to magical sensory bombardment while their bodies were undergoing the treatments. For those able to truly open themselves to the changes the result was soul mutation. Many washed out of the program, unable to truly let go and open up their souls. These unfortunates were inevitably crippled by the incomplete enhancement process, which was hideous enough that most of the ones who didn't die asked to be killed. The EOA complied.

The EOA's methods were akin to some of what Jason had experienced inadvertently, although their methods were much cruder and without the months of treatment Jason was given afterwards to help him through the trauma. They also lacked the strength his soul had already gained from ranking up. The result of the EOA's practices were souls that did grow stronger but were warped in the process.

Decades of advancement had managed to reduce the impact on the mental state of the recipients, although the specific means were a closely guarded secret. The recipients themselves remembered only strange feelings, having been in induced comas through the process. Only echoes remained in their souls.

The earliest iron-rank subjects had suffered from twisted minds, which manifested in ways ranging from catatonia to malevolent and depraved tendencies. As the program developed, advancements were made and the later, Bronze-rank subjects showed significantly better results. While the successful subjects often lacked imagination and critical-thinking skills, they made for excellent dumb muscle.

The latest iteration of the process had entirely eliminated the mental problems through the production of a mysterious and extremely secretive implant. The silver-rank enhanced were mentally normal to all tests, without sacrificing any of the abilities the

earlier iterations shared. They were even possible to produce in larger numbers than previous iterations, allowing for the heroes deployed across the world.

The silver-rank enhanced, like their lower-rank predecessors, were able to use alchemical boosts to enhance their rank temporarily but the key material for the boosts were spirit coins. Without access to gold spirit coins, the ability of the silver-rank enhanced to boost themselves was purely theoretical.

What they did have at full strength were magic tattoos. Unlike the magic tattoos Jason was familiar with, these were designed specifically to work with the enhanced, allowing them to carry multiples of each without the magic coming into conflict. Hidden away beneath their costumes, their magic tattoos gave the enhanced access to more exotic powers than just silver rank strength, toughness and speed. Each of the superhero-branded enhanced was given a standard suite that allowed them to project energy beams from their eyes and fly for short periods.

The enhanced had enough of each tattoo to put on a show or to use in a critical moment, but not to employ continually. Although an essence user could only use one tattoo, the silver-ranked enhanced were able to have eight. Even with this advantage, the lack of boost serum meant the superheroes were no match for an equivalent-rank essence user.

Once alerted to the appearance of monsters in town the EOA's media teams moved in on a helicopter and in cars. The media teams were staffed with bronze-rank enhanced and would be able to handle themselves, whatever they told the audience. When the media were in place, the superheroes activated their first flight tattoos.

The heroes flew over a town of people who were fleeing and screaming in response to the multitude of rock monsters pursuing them through the streets. Some of the monsters were hulking, vaguely-humanoid elementals with no heads and giant, opalescent crystals embedded in their chests. Others were basketball-sized flying creatures of crystal and stone, the crystals of each small monster being either blue or red. The smaller monsters with blue crystals conjured up icicles and shot them like arrows, while the red-crystal monsters sent out motes of fire that burned flesh and buildings alike.

The larger monsters, despite their larger crystals, seemed to have no attendant power. They were rampaging around using pure, brute force, smashing through walls and using cars as bludgeons. They seemed more interested in destruction than in killing while the smaller monsters hunted people almost exclusively. Only the fire types would throw flames at the surroundings if no people were around to offer themselves as targets.

The silver-rank superheroes had strength and fortitude in the upper ranges of silver but their speed was closer to the baseline. Even so, they were weaker but faster than the silver-rank monsters.

Each superhero wore magically-enhanced metal gauntlets so as to not use their bare hands against monsters. Without their boost serum, they were equivalent to a mediocre essence user who never used their abilities properly. Only the occasional burst of eyebeams supplemented their brawling combat.

They did not have the strength or the numbers to handle the monsters. The proto-space they had forcibly unleashed on Broken Hill was a category three, and a strong one at that. The larger monsters were silver-rank and there was no shortage of them. The smaller monsters were all bronze-rank.

This was acceptable to the EOA, however. The objective was not to save the people of Broken Hill but to be seen stepping in when the Network had failed. They would pass off the death toll on the Network's failure, played alongside their own people fighting a desperate, but ultimately doomed battle. The EOA media teams were more than happy to make their narrative explicit, as their target demographic were not the strong thinkers.

"The valour of the League of Heroes is clear but they can only do so much. If the governments of the world would offer them support, perhaps such tragedies could be avoided. So long as they continue to prop up the failing Global Defense Network, how many of the so-called safe zones will suffer the fate of Broken Hill? Is Melbourne or Sydney next?"

The armed militia of the EOA had already long fled, leaving the locals and refugees to their fate. The population of the town, scared and scattered, were buoyed by the arrival of the heroes, only to quickly realise that they were little help. Instead of going after the small monsters hunting people, the heroes rushed into visually exciting clashes with the large monsters destroying the town while leaving the people largely alone.

On the outskirts of town, an obsidian arch rose from the ground. Jason stepped out, his cloak manifesting around him as he surveyed the scene of death and destruction. Despite all the things he had seen, it was an apocalyptic display that gave even him pause.

"Shade, bring the bodies you have protecting the family here. We're going to need them all."