

Chapter 347

Get to the Chopper

Kaito had been supplied with a variety of awakening stones loaded towards producing useful compliments to his main power. Koen Waters had seen potential in Kaito's abilities and had the Network recruit him and provide the stones to complete his power set. They started with common stones, like awakening stones of the gun and various elemental stones. Less common were the awakening stones of vision and reach.

The result was a comprehensive suite of abilities that turned Kaito and his helicopter into a high-utility asset for the Network. His helicopter was not well-suited to confronting powerful monsters but was highly effective at escaping pursuit and handling the kinds of weaker enemies that appeared in greater numbers than their more powerful counterparts.

The true value of Kaito's contribution was twofold, with neither factor being the hunting of monsters. One was that he could swiftly and safely deploy tactical units or supplies throughout an incursion space, while the other was the improvement it brought to the command and control capabilities of the incursion response team.

Kaito's vehicle was sized in between a military transport helicopter and a large commercial helicopter while being faster and more agile than both. He was able to modify the helicopter literally on the fly, reconfiguring the interior to meet his needs moment to moment. From luxuriously-spaced passenger transport to efficient troop seating to cargo space, complete with loading platform, the helicopter could perform whatever role was asked of it.

What really excited the Director of Tactical Operations was the helicopter's value as a mobile command relay. The helicopter had a communication system was as useful, if not more so, than Jason's party interface. It was able to augment ordinary comms technology to operate reliably in magically saturated areas. It could also serve as a sensor platform, courtesy of Kaito powers. His abilities were able to collect and relay video feed and sensor data from helicopter itself, as well as remote auxiliary units.

Those auxiliary units were the two semi-autonomous drone variants Kaito could produce with abilities from his vehicle essence. One type was a trio of small attack units, mounted with infantry-grade guns. The more useful consisted of a half-dozen observation drones that had no weapons but could travel extended ranges at high speed. They carried high-grade video and audio systems, along with the sensor capacity to track magic and auras.

Kaito's observation drones were an improvement over the two varieties the Network used. The non-magical ones they employed had significant reliability issues in magical zones. The magical ones were much better but were fuelled by spirit coins, a limited and costly resource. Kaito's drones used his mana and could reliably transmit video, audio and sensor data to the helicopter, the base camp or both.

The sensor suites available to the drones and the helicopter itself came courtesy of Kaito's perception power that was akin to something many summoning specialists gained access to. Rather than enhance his own senses, at least at iron-rank, it bestowed the perception power on something else. Instead of a summon, as was typical, the subject was the sensors of his helicopter, providing magic and aura senses that outstripped a normal iron-ranker. More mundane sensor systems came as part of the helicopter conjuration power, although those systems were magically enhanced.

Drone control and secondary system management were all controlled from the cockpit. Rather than a physical dashboard of displays and screens, there was only a sleek and minimalist dashboard of controls. All systems were monitored through augmented reality glasses that could provide or eliminate any and all displays as needed, from drone feeds to helicopter systems.

Control of the secondary systems could be carried out by the pilot, but they were most effectively managed by a co-pilot, for which reason the network had supplied the helicopter with a crew. Kaito's three-person crew ended up being Asya and Greg, who had both known Kaito for years, along with a category three whose job was to step in when something big and nasty appeared.

Greg took the co-pilot slot. Kaito had been teaching him how to fly a helicopter but his true role was to manage the drones, sensors and comms. He had been chosen both for his existing connection to Kaito and what turned out to be a prodigious talent for multitasking.

Asya was combat support. She was somewhat superfluous, with the category three on board, but in addition to being groomed for higher rank, her power set gave her a useful niche. With her gun, gathering and adept essences forming the master confluence, she was rapidly becoming an expert sniper and general support gunner.

She had actually finalised her own repertoire of abilities with this role in mind, completing her power set only after being assigned to the helicopter. She had chosen some awakening stones specifically to add some heavier weapon options to her original, precision sniper approach.

The silver-ranker wasn't a ranged attacker like Asya. Ruth didn't look like a Russian bodybuilder so much as like she'd eaten a Russian bodybuilder and wanted to fist-fight an army transport to work off the carbs. It would have been a one-sided victory, given the silver-ranker's abilities. Her might, swift, and hand essences combined to form the onslaught confluence, making her a powerhouse of speed and strength with battering ram fists. She excelled in intercepting and putting down dangerous attackers, which was exactly her role on the helicopter's crew.

Despite having arms the thickness of Greg's head, Ruth was incongruously sweet and friendly, with unassailable confidence that her lower-rank companions found reassuring.

Kaito's helicopter moved high over the ground in the proto space, with a section of Network troops in the back. An occasional wind or lightning elemental would approach, at which point Kaito's supplemental abilities came into play. An expensive awakening stone of dimension had given Kaito a retractable gun for his helicopter that fired rapid streams of disruptive-force ammunition, which was effective at dissuading even the bronze-rank elemental variants from approaching. It wasn't enough to kill them but it convinced them to veer off in search of weaker prey.

"I've got a category two flier, coming in fast at 10 o'clock," Kaito said as a signal appeared on the cockpit sensors. The current cockpit configuration had four seats for the crew, with a bare-bones troop transport set up in the main compartment.

"Fast or tough?" Ruth asked.

"Fast," Kaito said. "You're up, Asya."

A small panel next to Asya opened up, letting in a rush of air. Asya conjured a sniper rifle and slid the barrel out through the panel, eyeing down the sight.

"Altering trajectory to give you a shot," Kaito said and soon after, a black lizard with huge wings fell into Asya's sights.

Asya had an ability to ignore rank disparity that was more like Farrah's than Jason's in that it was an essence ability, rather than an evolved racial gift. Even so, getting a one-shot kill on a bronze-rank monster was unlikely given the toughness of monsters.

Asya still could have gone for the kill, her power set allowing her to gather and condense ambient magic for a single, potent shot. If she could land the headshot, it should be enough to drop the creature, given that flying monsters weren't usually as tough as their land-bound counterparts.

Instead of risking a high-impact shot on the monsters relatively small head, she aimed for the broad wings. She used a special attack that erupted in a proximity burst, only needing to get close. The power didn't match a direct hit but it tagged one of the creature's wings, not crippling it but causing it to drop away, rapidly losing altitude.

"Nice," Kaito said, then noticed Greg staring into space.

"What is it?" Kaito asked.

"I just watched Jason through one of the drones," he said. "I'd only seen him fight in some patchy drone footage from before he left. It doesn't seem like him, all black-clad and ominous."

"That's exactly like him," Kaito said. "Such a melodramatist."

"I'd like to see that footage," Ruth said. "Can you send it to me?"

"Sure," Greg said.

Ruth put on the augmented reality goggles hanging on the back of Greg's seat in front of her.

"Cancel that," Kaito said. "We're coming up on the drop point."

Greg radioed the section of troops in the rear, telling them to prepare for deployment. Kaito dropped the helicopter to two-hundred metres and brought it into a hover. Normally he would go lower but there were a lot of flying monsters in this particular proto-space.

In the rear compartment, the side of the helicopter slid open as a panel on the floor slid away to reveal what looked like a small wind turbine pointing up. It started blasting air, which oddly collected in front of the open side panel, shimmering in place.

"Go!" the section leader called out and the first trooper dashed through the shimmering air and out of the helicopter, falling away. Some of the shimmering air attached itself to him as he passed through it. The whole section jumped out, one by one, plunging toward the ground.

Right before they landed, the shimmering air around them tightened into a cushion, depositing them softly onto the ground before dissipating in a rush of wind. Back on the helicopter, the side door closed itself and Kaito set course for the next objective.

"I have to say," Jason said from the rear of the cockpit, "I'm kind of annoyed at how well this worked out."

The helicopter crew all turned to look at him in surprise.

"I was going to give you the rat, snake and skunk essences," Jason continued. "I wish I had, now, to be honest."

"How did you get in here?" Kaito asked.

"I've got magic powers. How do you not know that at this point?"

"I have security abilities," Kaito said. "Sensor abilities."

Ruth chuckled, sharing an amused look with Jason.

"The tyranny of rank, little brother."

"You're the little brother," Kaito said.

"That may be true out in the world, Kai," Jason said, "but not here. This is my kingdom."

Jason and Asya were walking along the Castle Heads shorefront. Grass led down to white sand on one side of the street, while the other had cafés and storefronts. Asya and Jason were heading for the ice cream shop.

"This is my kingdom." Asya quoted. "Really?"

"A bit much?" Jason asked.

"A bit? That was cringeworthy. Not as sad as Greg constantly telling people to 'get to the chopper' in a sketchy accent, but not good."

"I thought it was cool," Jason said.

"It was not. It was also rather mean."

"Kaito deserves it."

"That's a boy's complaint. It's time for you to be a man."

"Ouch. Greg thought it was cool."

Asya gave him a flat look.

"I'm torpedoing my own point here, aren't I."

"Greg is great," Asya said. "But he's also a little bit twelve years old. The man wears Ninja Turtle shirts to briefings."

"To briefings about fighting monsters from another dimension using magic powers. Ninja Turtle shirts should be the uniform."

"I don't think Ketevan is going to like dealing with the both of you at once," she said with a laugh.

"What's going on with Greg's abilities, though?" Jason asked. "Wasn't that combination meant to give him the magitech confluence?"

"It did."

"Every magitech guy I've seen in the Network is all about high-tech gadgets and stuff. They're half James Bond and half Iron Man. How did Greg end up all steampunk Tesla?"

"You don't like his electrified nail turret?"

"No, it's awesome, I'm just saying."

"You know, we still need to talk about Network business. That is technically what we're meeting about."

"Are you sure I can't tell you another heroic story about my trip away?"

"Alright," Asya said with an accommodation Jason immediately found suspect. "Did you happen to run in Li Li Mei while you were passing through China?"

"Who?" Jason asked innocently. "Oh, the Network rep who came here that one time. I don't recall her being super-pretty at all."

"Is that right?"

"So," Jason said. "Time to dig into that Network business you say?"

"No," Asya said, pointing at the shop they were now standing in front of. "It's time for ice cream."

"Right, yes," Jason said, pushing open the door.

"How long were you in China for?" Asya asked as they went inside.

"You know, I might just go vanilla. People look down on it as a plain flavour, but a proper vanilla can be really delicious..."

On the roof deck of the houseboat, Asya and Jason were sitting next to one another at a table. Asya was taking through the important things he had missed during his time away.

"...escalating rate of manifestation, which you've already seen for yourself. The new training programs are starting to pay off but it's going to take time in areas outside of Australia. The new training protocols we've developed with input from Farrah are showing their effects here, but the international partners now have to go back and work with their own people. Even then, we're talking about training programs that have been developed and implemented in a critically short time. The largest deficit is experience."

"There's only one solution to a lack of experience," Jason said, "and that's to go out and get it."

"We're projecting significant problems. In the short term, we're anticipating a sharp increase in casualties."

"That's realistic," Jason said. "The Network is never going to fight the way they do in the other world and they'd be foolish to try. They need to learn from what Farrah can teach them but find a way to use it that works for them. All Farrah was really trying to impart were principles, as well as things like improved meditation methodology. She can't turn the whole Network into adventurers in six months."

"No, it's on us, now. You know, the original idea was for you to do the teaching."

"You're better off, believe me. It's a matter of temperament."

"Oh, I believe you."

"Hey..."

"The last thing we need to discuss is the image you built up during your time away."

"I was trying to avoid building an image."

Asya opened a video depicting a man in starlight cloak fighting people in a Vietnamese slum.

"For the most part," Jason added. "If the Network doesn't want me showing off, you should stop trying to kidnap me."

"We came down on the Hanoi branch the same way we did Lyon. Disturbingly, we got the exact same result, once we started digging."

"Meaning what?"

"Adrien Barbou."

"You're kidding. I thought he hadn't resurfaced."

"We're keeping it quiet, for now. We believe he's working with the EOA, feeding them information from his old Network contacts. We're currently attempting to infiltrate those contacts to get something concrete we can slap the EOA with. We can't just accuse them of orchestrating the blackouts and go after them with no evidence because the Cabal won't stand for it. The Network is the strongest of the world's magical triad but we aren't stronger than the other two put together. If we start acting unilaterally against the EOA, the Cabal will side with them out of fear we'll go after them next."

"Why are you even telling me?"

"Our analysts think that Barbou has taken it upon himself to become your publicist."

"What?" Jason asked.

"We constantly monitor media for potential breaches," Asya explained. "When you went more overt after Hanoi we paid additional attention to any media attention related to your activities. We realised that someone was putting the pieces together and quietly dropping breadcrumbs for others to find."

"Why?"

"We don't know. We stumbled into the idea that Barbou might be the man behind the curtain because we've been looking into his old contacts. As for his motivations, the best we've come up with is that a magic man secretly running around the world doing good deeds fits the EOA agenda of bringing magic into the light. They might have seen us not clamping down on you and tried to run with it."

"He's making me look good?"

"That's arguable. We're seeing a lot of fringe chatter around the Starlight Angel/Starlight Rider persona, but conspiracy types don't tend to look at things in a positive light."

"I was healing the sick."

"But did you make them sick, as an excuse to implant tracking devices? Were you testing a bioweapon for use when your people start the invasion?"

"They think I'm an alien?"

"You are an alien."

"I am now, but they don't know that. I'm from the Mid North Coast, not the mid-north of Andromeda."

"You really don't know anything about astronomy, do you?"

"Because I'm not an alien!"