

Chapter 354

A Very Long To-Do List

Strategy meetings to develop effective responses to the monster waves were taking place all over the world. At one such meeting in Sydney, Network and military personnel were discussing the responses still being rolled out, less than a day after the monster waves had begun. Sydney's Director of tactical Operations, Koen Waters, was addressing a meeting being held in a large briefing room.

"In most instances, we anticipate tried and tested methodology to be effective. Existing sweep and clear tactics are the most effective means to rapidly exterminate waves. We foresee three main scenarios where alternative approaches will be more effective. One is when the monsters are clustered together even more than usual and in wide-open spaces. This is a best-case scenario for us because a small number of high-category-operators specialised in area coverage can clear these scenarios. After that, a small team for mop up will be all we need." □

"How often can we expect to see this best-case scenario?" Annabeth Tilden asked. □

"In the outback, quite frequently," Koen said. "There's an awful lot of flat and empty out there and those are the areas with no dimensional space patrol coverage. This is good news. Australia's geographically-condensed population will see us through this far better than many other nations."

"What's your opinion on the best way to spin this to make us seem in control?"

"Shut up, Other Gordon," Anna said. "This is a strategy meeting, not a political one. What's scenario two, Koen?"

Other Gordon fumed, about to shoot back when he felt the oppression of Koen's aura, leaving him flustered.

"Scenario two is when the landscape is just the opposite. Complex terrain, poor sightlines. It's a bug hunt where the bugs are the size of a bread truck and setting up ambushes."

An Army Major spoke up.

"Military vehicles are much easier to use when not trying to get them through the apertures," he said. "To what degree do you anticipate that compensating?"

"We're rolling out the magically enhanced heavy ordnance program that has been in the works since the category-four incident in England. Major, you should see magically enhanced, vehicle-mounted weapons arriving at bases before the end of the day. Numbers are still limited but we expect them to have an increasing impact as more

enhanced weaponry is mobilised. At the end of the day, though, the best solutions are the small-group special strike teams we've been training up over the last nine months. The ones we're training from scratch aren't ready for deployment, but the retrained teams are already showing positive results."□

"You anticipate things being under control, then?" Other Gordon asked.

"Not even close," Koen said. "I'll be discussing the key problems after outlining the scenarios, the third one of which is the problem of power. High-category dimensional spaces contain primarily category-two dimensional entities, along with one or more category threes. Our specialist strike teams have the strength to handle them but not the numbers, while our combined military/Network sweeper teams have the numbers but not the strength."□

"Couldn't this scenario be combined with either of the other two?" Anna asked.

"Yes," Koen said. "A scenario one and three combination is harder to deal with than a one, but still manageable. It's combining two and three where things get rough. As we speak, that is the exact situation we're facing at a location in the Blue Mountains. We have multiple strike teams en route, plus Jason Asano."□

"This is the man from the news?" the major asked.

"It is," Koen said. "With every analysis we've made of Asano's capabilities, he has turned around and outstripped our projections. Personally, I'm hoping that he never stops, because we do not have what we need to meet the challenges ahead. Too few people, too few resources, too little power."□

"I'm assuming this meeting wasn't called just for you to explain how buggered we are," the major said.

"It was not," Koen said. "There is a response that is being tried in some other parts of the world. Africa and Russia are already reporting positive results, only a day into the monster wave. They've been drawing on external support."

"Please tell me you aren't talking about the EOA and their bloody superheroes," Anna said. "League of Heroes my arse."

"No," Koen said.

"I think we need to consider that option," Other Gordon said. "They're getting a lot of positive traction."

"Not an option," Anna said. "Even if we were willing to overlook that they were responsible for this in the first place and then responsible for neutering an effective response in the lead-up, they aren't willing to work with us. Even in situations where we

have arrived together at the same events, they overtly operate alone, with their media teams in tow."□

"Their numbers are actually smaller than their media presence would suggest," Koen said. "They do not present the kind of help we need. The Cabal does, and they already have strongholds in the kind of remote, isolated areas where we need increased strategic options."

"So they can claim the credit, too?" Other Gordon asked.

"Actually, just the opposite," Koen said. "The cabal's concern is that their members will get lumped-in with the monsters. If we help keep them hidden until the world has a better handle on everything that's going on, they're offering their secret support."

"Then as the governments representative, I approve," Other Gordon said. "Further, we should be pushing the narrative with our own media teams."

"Absolutely not," Anna said.

"Actually, I agree with Mr Truffett," the major said.

"Who?" Anna asked.

"Me!" Other Gordon roared.

"Oh, right," Anna said. "But no, to media."

"Mrs Tilden," the major said. "Your organisation are used to secrets, but the time for secrets is over. Mr Truffett is not wrong that we are fighting a war on multiple fronts, one of which is public opinion. If we let the Engineers of Ascension control the narrative, that is a beachhead from which they'll launch their invasion. The military has long had protocols for embedding press. We'll use them and show the real face of this conflict."

Anna sighed unhappily but didn't argue back.

"We're willing to discuss it," she said.

A flight of transport helicopters flew over forested mountains. Jason and Akari Asano were just two of a gaggle of essence users, mostly bronze and silvers from strike teams trained by Farrah. Jason and Akari were in Kaito's helicopter, along with one of the strike teams.

The helicopters were on route to where an advanced team had been setting up a landing zone ahead of the monsters' predicted path. The monsters were spread out over a large area, that they were currently flying over. It would be a lengthy and laborious task to dig them all out.□

The silver-rank section leader leaned over to speak to Jason.

"I know you do best working independently. You want us to drop you off here?"

"That'd be great," Jason said.

"We're going to jump out here," he told Akari, then turned to the cockpit door.

"HEY KAI. OPEN THE SIDE DOOR."

The cockpit door slid open. Kaito's flight crew, Asya, Greg and Ruby were in front with him.

"I can hear you," Kaito said. "No need to shout."

"WHAT? I CAN'T HEAR YOU OVER THE HELICOPTER!"

"What are you talking about?" Kaito called back. Switching the helicopter controls over to Greg, Kaito got up and stood in the cockpit doorway.

"I THINK SOMETHING IS WRONG WITH YOUR HELICOPTER," Jason yelled into the near-silent helicopter. "IT'S NOT NORMALLY THIS LOUD."□

Kaito frowned at him in confusion.□

"I WAS WONDERING ABOUT THAT MYSELF," Greg yelled from the front.

Kaito looked questioningly at the Network strike team, who all put their hands over their ears and shook their heads.

"What the hell is going on?" Kaito asked, looking around at his helicopter with worry. "Is it a magic thing?"

Then saw the confused expression on Akari's face and turned a glare on Jason.

"You're an asshole."

The helicopter was filled with laughter as a grouchy Kaito went back to his seat. Slapping a hand on the console, the side door of the helicopter opened up. Still moving at speed, it filled the space with loud, rushing air.

"GET THE HELL OFF MY HELICOPTER," Kaito yelled back, then the cockpit door slammed closed, cutting the cockpit off from the rushing air.

Jason nodded at the door to Akari and they jumped out. Jason made sure he stayed close to her as they dropped, since the cranky Kaito had not activated the slow-fall power of the helicopter. Despite not having a slow-fall power of her own, Akari had leapt from the helicopter with no hesitation. As they closed on the ground, Jason reached out to grab her with a shadow arm and pulled her into his body, using his cloak to arrest their fall.

Jason dropped them lightly into an area with lighter tree coverage and they both turned their heads to the right. A silver-rank monster had sensed their descent and was making a swift but silent path through the trees.

"Let's see what you can do," Jason said and Akari nodded, moving forward.

Despite being a silver-rank monster, it was smaller than most iron-ranks at half the length of a person. A thin, dark green lizard, it had four long legs with feet almost like hands and a flexible tail that ended in a spine-covered bulb. It was quick, jumpy and did a decent job of hiding its aura. There were other silver-rank monsters nearby and it seemed to have tried to use their auras to mask its own. Once it was close, however, they were able to differentiate it.

Jason faded into the shadows as the creature sprung to the attack, engaging Akari in a battle of mobility, speed and quick defences. Physically weak for such a powerful monster, it boasted a suite of special attack forms instead. It shot venomous spines that rapidly regrew on the bulb tail and spat clouds of poison gas that lingered, complicating the environment. It could also spit out a trio of barbed tongues to make flexible, piercing attacks.

Akari was a swordmaster, very much in the vein Jason was familiar with from the other world. She had the ubiquitous combination amongst such essence users of the Sword and Adept essences, in her case matching it with the Magic essence to produce the Master confluence. Forgoing other common choices like the Swift or Foot essences denied her the selection of mobility powers they offered but her adept essence had clearly enhanced her agility. She sprang around the trees almost as easily as the lizard, both of them treating the trees like solid ground and barely putting a foot to soil.

The advantage of her magic essence was that it expanded her repertoire in the face of more exotic abilities. Like other swordmasters, she met attack with attack, her Magic essence giving her more interesting options. It also provided her with a blinking teleport, compensating for the lack of a dedicated mobility essence.

Jason was familiar with the power, which was better in a close-range fight than the teleport Humphrey had from his own magic essence. Akari's ability did not offer long-range travel at higher ranks. Instead, it became more and more effective as a combat ability than Humphrey's or Jason's teleports. Akari left behind after-images that exploded with force and appeared phasing through the lizard, inflicting damage as she passed through it in a briefly incorporeal state.

Akari's sword sliced through the clouds of poison, which split with the blade's passage and dissolved into nothing. Clusters of spine projectiles were deflected by force waves from her swinging sword. The tongues only made one attempt to stab at her, which she nimbly dodged past before bringing her sword down on them. It didn't sever the silver-rank flesh but it did leave the tongues cut and bloody. The lizard snapped them back into its mouth and didn't send them out again.

The silver rank monster was trickier than most, but at the trade-off of much less fortitude. Its silver-rank body was still bizarrely tough for its size but it couldn't take the punishment of a larger monster and Akari eventually landed enough clean hits to take it down. □

Akari was a classic swordmaster, the type that was very popular on Adventure Society teams. If they had the ability that matched their high-skill power sets, and Akari certainly did with hers, then their balance of strength and endurance were always welcome. She couldn't frontload damage like Farrah or Humphrey or have the endurance of Jason, but she occupied an efficient middle ground of power and longevity. □

"You'd do very well in the other world," Jason told her and she gave him an inquisitive look.

"You really went to a whole other reality?"

"Yep," he said with a sad smile. "I miss my friends but I don't know when I'll get back to them. I have responsibilities here."

"You're going back?"

"Someday."

"How?"

"Figuring that out is on a very long to-do list, and not at the top. Ready to loot your first monster?"

Akari was connected to Jason through his party interface. With Kaito on site, it was not needed to provide comms for the response team, so it was just the two of them. Since they weren't in a proto-space, the lack of magic made the range of Jason's power too small anyway, for effective communication or for looting. □

Akari touched the monster and the loot prompt appeared in front of her.

➤ [Would you like to loot \[Toxic Hopper Lizard\]?](#)

"Yes," she accepted and then she grimaced at a face full of rainbow smoke, followed by a huge sack of coins landing on her head, staggering her. They were closely followed by a pair of green, lizard skin boots.

"The trick is to move away before activating the loot power," Jason told her. "Also, if you don't have a storage power, be sure to dodge."

"You could have told me those things beforehand," Akari said, leaning against a tree.

"Is that some humanity poking out from that taciturn exterior? 'Look at me, I'm a very stern clanswoman with a sword. I'm very good at stabbing.'"

"I am very good at stabbing," Akari said. "You would do well to remember."

Jason let out a chuckle.

"You don't seem too sloppy, so let's split up a little. I'll keep you in loot range; we won't run out of monsters."

"I don't have anything to keep things taken from monsters in."

"No worries," Jason said, tossing her an empty dimensional bag.

"What's this?" she asked picking it up.

"Dimensional bag," he said. "Bigger on the inside."

She held it up in front of her, looking at it with a sceptical expression.

"You're telling me that this thing is a bag of holding?" she asked and Jason narrowed his eyes at her.

"Do you play Dungeons & Dragons?" he asked.

Her face froze for an instant before she schooled it back into a mask.

"No."