

Chapter 338

Options

"I told you before we went on our helicopter ride that you were a tricky one to find a combination for," Jason told Amy. They were in her kitchen, along with Farrah, while Kaito watched the girls in the back yard.

"The issue is that you don't have the training to be a fighter," Farrah said. "With utility sets, the best bet is to leverage life skills but you're a politician. I'm not saying that doesn't involve skills, but not the kinds that are as easy to leverage as being a cook or a sailor."

"We have a combination here that we think will work for you," Jason said.

"It's a combination that political leaders in my world often use," Farrah said. "It's centred around knowledge and perception."

"What if I don't want that?" Amy asked. "I'm comfortable with my political capabilities as they are. What if I want some proper magic powers. Fireballs and lightning bolts."

Jason and Farrah shared a glance, Farrah snorting a laugh.

"Jason said you might say something like that," Farrah said. "That's why we prepared another option for you to choose from. Just to be clear, I don't think this is the way you should go. This is a raw combat combination and you have two little girls. It's not the time to go throwing yourself into danger with no training."

"Which is something we've also taken into account," Jason said. "We've picked out a combination based around what I call the Thadwick Principle. It's all about maximising damage output and minimising skill requirements."

"The idea," Farrah said, "is that you pump out a lot of power very quickly. We're envisaging a scenario where your family encounters some manner of unexpected threat and you can respond with extreme power. You won't be up for an extended fight, but you'll be able to finish a short one definitively. This is something like my approach, by the way."

"The combination is built around the gun essence," Jason said. "Guns are relatively easy to learn to at least a competent level. They also make a strong platform for humans, who are better at magical special attacks than full-blown magic spells."

"The big thing you'll need to learn is mana management, which I can teach you," Farrah said. "As I said, the burst of power approach is how I operate."

They waited for Amy to respond as she considered their proposal.

"Guns," she said finally. "That isn't exactly fireballs and lightning bolts."

"You understand the basics of an essence combination," Jason said. "Three essences, combining to make a fourth."

He plucked three cubes out of the air to plonk on the table, one after another. The first was gunmetal grey.

“Gun essence,” he said.

The next cube looked like glass containing a swirling mix of red, orange and yellow.

“Fire essence.”

The last was a dark blue cube with lightning arcing about on the inside from a central orb, like a plasma sphere.

“Lightning essence,” he said. “Your husband conjures up a helicopter. What we’re talking about here are flamethrowers and lightning guns.”

Amy trepidatiously reached out to pick up the lightning essence, then turned it over on her hands as she examined it.

“It’s tingling my fingers,” she said.

Jason and Farrah waited. Amy had seen essences before, but this was her first time holding one in her hands.

“Lightning gun?” she asked.

“Lightning gun,” Jason said.

Amy nodded to herself, a smile playing over her lips.

“Alrighty, then.”

As they rode back toward Ken’s property in Shade’s car form, Jason bowed his head, rubbing his fingers into his temple.

“Part of me still wants to have nothing to do with them,” Jason said. “I left and cut them out of my life for years and I’m not entirely convinced that wasn’t better.”

“It’s a mess,” Farrah said, “but if you start carving up your family, you can’t do the things you want to do.”

Jason, Farrah and Hiro had been going through long discussions about the future. Jason was no longer hopeful of going back to the other world but certain it would happen. He needed to know that the family left behind would be able to handle whatever came in the wake of magic going public.

Originally, that had been built around Erika and her family, but if they ended up joining him in the other world, that would obviously change. He was not fully convinced that was a good idea.

“It’s coming up on time for you to put aside family concerns, at least for the moment,” Farrah said. “We’ll essence up your parents and then it’s time to focus on our

development. I need to get a handle of my new power levels and it's past time you did some more aura work. You've been putting it off."

Since accepting the World-Phoenix's blessing and the transfiguration it engendered, Jason's aura had become more powerful than ever. It had reached the point where his once-excellent control was no longer able to finesse his aura as well as it had in the past. Even before that point, he had occasionally lost control during moments of emotional distress.

Farrah had given Jason his original training, which he had supplemented with his own practise and occasional help from others. Danielle Geller, especially, had given him some useful guidance around the time she recruited him to teach aura control himself. She helped him come to grips with his enhanced soul power after his encounter with the Builder's star seed. It had reached the point where his aura strength was outstripping his ability to control it with precision, a situation he found himself in once again.

After discussing it with Farrah, they had decided that Jason needed a new aura control paradigm, stripping his old habits to the bone and retraining from scratch. The key to their approach would be him learning to wield his aura on normal humans with art and finesse. If he could control fine applications of his aura with precision, his gross applications would become all the more refined.

For this reason, they had recruited Craig Vermillion. Jason had been impressed from the beginning with Vermillion's nuanced aura control and wished to learn from him. Vermillion, in turn, was interested in applying techniques from the other world. As Jason was impressed with his fine control, Vermillion wished to learn Jason and Farrah's methods of weaponising auras.

The first meeting between Farrah and Craig had not gone well, but Farrah had arrested her sword-swing when Jason interposed himself. It took some time to convince Farrah that Craig wasn't an irredeemable predator. Her feelings were so strong that Jason was left wondering about vampires in the other world.

He had not met any vampires before Craig other than the controlled minions of a blood weaver monster. Was there something about the higher magic of Pallimustus that affected vampire behaviour, or was it a matter of prejudice? He wondered if the troubles with essence-born vampires and monsters like the blood weaver had tainted public opinion on vampirism.

It was possible that the differences were societal in nature. In a world of forensic science and erotic vampire novels, had the vampires of Earth simply adapted to a more effective lifestyle?

Vermillion's new lifestyle of lazy days and his secluded mansion had grown on him quickly. He showed no signs of missing the stern agent of the Cabal Jason had first met and his laconic attitude had won Farrah over.

"Once we've done Mum and Dad's essences, I'd like to pull back from the family stuff," Jason said. "From time to time I've found myself getting caught up in events and I've found it beneficial in those times to get back to basics. Put aside everything else for a while and focus on the fundamentals. I loved those early days, training with you and Rufus and Gary."

"I thought you'd crack immediately," Farrah said. "You were weirdly driven, though."

"Erika's going to be like that, too," Jason said. "You've seen what her daughter is like. Erika won't like using cores."

"Emi is oddly intense, even in the early training we've given her," Farrah said. "Right now I see her as the only one who should forgo cores, and that's only because we have the time to train her properly. We don't have skill books to cover, the way we did for you."

"We'll give them some training, though," Jason said.

"Of course," Farrah agreed. "Erika will realise that she has enough to learn just mastering the utility uses of her powers. We'll help them with the combat aspects, but only enough to get by. Unless they're fighting monsters on a regular basis, it isn't worth the training time, otherwise. Despite what Rufus will tell you, sometimes core advancement is the best choice."

"I still need to teach them all about the most basic stuff," Jason said. "They can sense auras now, which is going to weird them out. I don't think we told them they don't poop anymore."

"Didn't the Network offer to take all that off your hands?" Farrah asked.

"Hey, you're right," Jason said, brightening up. "I forgot after Erika dragged her feet, but they wanted to do a big, 'welcome to magic' seminar."

He took out his phone and called Ketevan. Anna's former deputy had filled her spot as Director of Operations smoothly as Anna moved up into the steering committee.

"How bad is it?" Ketevan said by way of greeting. "Please tell me you didn't sink your town into the ocean like Atlantis or something."

"Nothing like that," Jason said. "Does that offer to run my family through the Network family induction program still stand?"

"As in, we tell them how to navigate the magic world instead of you?" Ketevan asked. He was able to hear her sitting up straight in her chair, just from the change in her tone.

“I’ll set it up immediately,” she said. “When can they come in? We could send a bus. Or a helicopter. Actually, I’ll send a team to you. What’s the time? Right, I’ll have them come in overnight and we can do it first thing. You won’t be there, right?”

“I will not,” Jason said.

“Great! I mean, that’s fine. We’ll rent a space, I’ll send you all the details.”

“Actually, can you just run it all through my sister?” Jason asked.

“No problem whatsoever. We have all her contact details.”

“Alright, then,” Jason said. “Just to let you know, I’m in the process of shoving a bunch of essences up in them. I’m mostly done, now.”

“We really would have liked you to consult with us on that.”

“Well, we can do that for anyone else,” Jason said. “I’ll tell Erika to expect your people to get in contact.”

After ending the call, Jason leaned back into the seat. The shadow-stuff seat Shade produced was akin to cloud furniture in comfort and he felt the tension melt out of him.

“Once we give Dad his essences,” he said, “we can do Mum last and we’re done.”

“Do you want to go over your father’s essences again?” Farrah asked.

“Not after what you were like with Uncle Hiro,” Jason said. “Every time we finalised the essences to give him, you started swapping them around.”

“I’ve always wanted to have an apprentice with the right essences for array magic,” Farrah said. “I didn’t expect it to be an old man but your uncle’s a dedicated learner. I just want to make sure we had the best combination for him.”

“Do you realise what I had to trade away to get another renewal essence?” Jason asked.

“I’m guessing a pile of stuff you didn’t want anyway.”

“A big pile,” Jason said. “A really big pile.”

“Anyway, it left you the vast essence to give to your father.”

“What was the final combination we gave Hiro again? At this point, I don’t even remember and I conducted the ritual.”

“The final combination was renewal, rune and balance to make the prosperity confluence.”

“Why did we pick balance over magic again?”

“It will help with getting formations to adapt to their environment. Since we now know that the magical density of your world is in flux, you’re going to want stability and flexibility in your permanent magical emplacements.”

“Okay,” Jason said wearily. “I know I should care. Uncle Hiro deserves that but the tank is empty. I’ll care tomorrow. Next week at the outside.”

“Leave Hiro to me,” Farrah said.

“Okay.”

“We still have to do your parents, though. Are you sure about your mother’s combination?”

“Yeah,” Jason said. “She’s such a Japanophile that she’ll take a lotus confluence over anything, even if it’s a terrible fit. Sword and water are cheap essences, and even after trading so many away, I’m still thick with plant essences.”

“What’s a Japanophile?”

“I’m selling the land,” Ken told Jason. “In the end, it was a project to help me get over the loss of my son, and my boy came back to me.”

Ken caught Jason in a hug. Even when the family wearied him the most, his father’s warm and undemanding support was a balm.

“I’ve decided to look towards the future, instead of the past,” Ken said. “I’m going to help Hiro in his project. We’re going to build something for the family.”

“You were hesitant about taking essences,” Jason said. “That’s going to be a major magical endeavour.”

Ken shook his head.

“I’ve been thinking about it a lot,” he said. “There was a time that you needed me and I wasn’t there. That’s not happening again. If this is your world, now, then I’m in. All the way.”

Jason’s face broke into a smile and he hugged his father again.

“You know,” Jason said, “Kaito can conjure a helicopter out of thin air, now.”

“Is it Airwolf?” asked, Ken, the original sinner of his children’s obsession with eighties action-adventure shows.

“Kind of,” Jason said. “It the same company who made the Bell 222 except it’s a concept helicopter. They haven’t even made a working prototype, yet, according to Kai. It kind of looks like a sci-fi submarine”

“Nice. Does that mean I could magic up a talking trans-am?”

“I’ve already got a talking car, Dad. You don’t want a Team Knight Rider situation.”

“No, you don’t,” Ken said, shaking his head. “That boy Taika, what is in his head?”

“I know he got involved in some bad stuff when he was younger, back in New Zealand,” Jason said. “His father got him out and brought the whole family to Australia.

Probably because he heard about the Team Knight Rider thing and knew his son was on a bad path.”

Farrah shook her head.

“Can we just move on to the magic powers, please?” she asked.

“You know,” Ken said, “I saw those mirage chambers in your recordings. You could use them to make a show about a knight with a talking horse that solves crime.”

“A black horse with red eyes,” Jason said.

“Exactly,” Ken agreed and Farrah put an exasperated hand over her eyes.

“They picked the wrong guy to save the world,” she grumbled.