

Chapter 335

The Direction We Want Them to Go

“You can’t just go around killing people,” Erika said.

She stood next to Farrah as Jason stepped off the surface of the water, rainbow smoke rising up behind him.

“If you’re going to go back with us to my world,” Farrah said, “Then you’ll have to learn the same lessons that he did. Starting with yes, he can just go around killing people.”

“That wasn’t a person,” Jason said. “It was a projection. I didn’t kill her so much as smash her phone.”

“That’s still not cool,” Erika said.

“She knew that I was being tortured and could have told Jason on the day we arrived,” Farrah said. “The next time I see her, I might punch her nose through her brain.”

“You know what is cool?” Jason asked. “Sleepytime.”

“We have a lot to talk about,” Erika said.

“We have a lot to sleep off,” Jason said. “Tomorrow, Sis.”

“Don’t go thinking you can skip out on that,” Erika warned.

“Sure,” Jason said. “Stay here so I can’t slink off. I’ll portal in your husband and aggressive strain of hugging vine.”

“Emi will be in bed by now,” Erika said.

Jason gave her a flat look and opened up a portal. Moments later, a pyjama-clad rocket flew out to grab Jason in a hug.

“What’s that smell?” Emi asked, wrinkling her nose the lingering scent of rainbow smoke. “It’s super nasty.”

“It’s your mum,” Jason said. “She’s been concealing it all this time through an unhealthy overuse of scented hand soaps, but now her secret’s out.”

“Don’t be mean to Mum, Uncle Jason,” Emi scolded. “She looks cranky. What did you do?”

“I didn’t do anything,” Jason asserted, throwing out his arms, indignantly. “Maybe we talked about Airwolf a little.”

“Which season?” Emi asked in the tone of a drill instructor as he handed a recruit just enough rope.

“Fourth,” Jason mumbled

“What was that?” Emi asked.

“Fourth,” Jason reluctantly confessed.

“What were you thinking?”

“I had a lot to drink.”

“That’s no excuse,” Emi scolded. “Really, what is that smell. It’s like an animal died inside a slightly larger animal.”

“It was a magic phone lady I broke,” Jason said.

“Okay. Can we stay here tonight?”

“Yes,” Erika said. “Go get your dad.”

In the sober light of morning, the previous night’s revelations played through Jason’s head. His spirit attribute had improved his memory to the point that even magical alcohol didn’t impair it, at least of his own rank. If it was brewed from silver-rank ingredients, the story could easily change. He had no hangover, as his recovery attribute was more than up to the task of refreshing him over the course of a night’s sleep.

On the top deck of the houseboat, all the current occupants were sitting around a table sharing a buffet breakfast courtesy of Jason. Erika was a little too seedy for extravagant morning cookery. Ian and Emi, Farrah, Hiro and Taika rounded out the group.

“So,” Jason said. “It looks like we have to save the world. It seemed hilarious a few drinks in, but all of a sudden we’re responsible for seven billion people.”

“What do you mean by save the world?” Ian asked.

“What do you mean by we?” Erika asked. “Fighting evil seems like more of a you job. I might cater, but I’ll leave confronting the forces of darkness to you.”

“Just to be clear, are we seriously talking about saving the world?” Ian asked. “That’s not a metaphor or something, right.”

“Nope,” Jason said. “Literally save the world.”

“From what?” Ian asked. “Climate change?”

“Something like that,” Jason said. “It’s like an extra, additional climate change that will eventually wipe out the planet. Basically, some bad guys in an alternate universe are doing something that is slowly destroying our world as a knock-on effect.”

“Destroying the world is collateral damage?” Hiro asked.

“To these guys, yeah,” Jason said. “I’ve fought them before. They’ve killed thousands. They killed Farrah.”

All eyes turned to Farrah.

“What?” she asked. “If you’re going to come back from the dead, you have to die of something, first. I’ll get mine back by stopping what they’re doing.”

“How long do we have before the world ends?” Hiro asked.

"Years," Jason said. "Quite a lot of years, but the longer we take, the more damage we can't take back."

"So, what do we do?" Taika asked.

"It's a marathon, not a sprint," Jason said. "It's going to take me years to learn the magic involved properly."

"It seems crazy," Ian said and Jason laughed.

"You should see it from my perspective. I mean, I have a healthy ego, but surely there has to be someone better, right?"

"Why is it you?" Hiro asked. "Why not someone else?"

"Because the full answer isn't here," Farrah said. "We were told that we would need to return to my world before the task was done."

"We're talking about decoupling worlds," Jason said. "We're the ones with the tools, the knowledge and the experience of walking both worlds."

"Sounds like there isn't someone better," Hiro said.

"I think its awesome," Emi said.

"Of course you do," Jason said. "You're twelve."

"Let's face it, Jason," Erika said. "So are you."

"I did think it was awesome," Jason admitted. "Now that I've sobered up, I'm just terrified. I can't get my head around the responsibility. Two years ago, before I went away, would any of you have wanted me to be the one responsible for every life on Earth? That's the kind of thing they put your face on the money for and I am not the guy whose face you put on the money."

Farrah took a spirit coin from her pocket and slid it across the table, with the image of Jason on it face up.

"Rufus would trust you with that responsibility," she said. "We met you almost two years ago and he knew immediately that you could be great."

"Immediately? You mean when the cannibals had us in those cages and instead of escaping I was hit upside the head with a shovel?" Jason asked.

"Maybe not immediately," Farrah conceded. "But from the first day. You saved all our lives."

"He did?" Erika asked. "Jason, you were always kind of vague about events before your recordings started."

Emi picked up the coin and peered at it.

"Uncle Jason, this has your old chin."

"He never told you the story of how we met?" Farrah asked.

“He said you all escaped some cannibal cult together.”

“Yes,” Farrah said. “I’ve seen some things in my career, but nothing like that kitchen.”

“Maybe skip that particular detail at breakfast,” Jason said with a shudder as he recalled the horrifying image of the Vane Estate kitchen.

“I think you’re right,” Farrah said. “I’ll take you through events from the beginning, at least from my perspective. For me, it started when my team was hired to investigate this family of reclusive aristocrats, living out in the middle of the desert...”

Jason had fed enough magic quintessence into his cloud flask that the houseboat could produce a more-than-adequate ritual room. Combined with the vortex accumulator gathering magic, it made for a space of balanced ambient magic, ideal for conducting rituals.

It also had an adjacent room with enclosed shower stalls for post-ranking-up needs. Water infused with crystal wash sprayed not just from above but all around, making for a cleaning experience second only to an undiluted supply of crystal wash.

Jason drew out the diagram for the essence ritual with a stick of chalk, the room allowing him to do so with minimal adjustments for ambient magic. Once again, Jason appreciated how good it was to have Clive making the same thing possible in the middle of the wilderness using his abilities.

Hiro, Ian and Erika looked like it was laundry day, wearing a selection of old and faded ultra-casual wear. Jason had made it clear that whatever they were wearing, they would wear ever again. Emi was giggling at them as she stood out of the way with Farrah.

Mostly, though, Emi’s attention was on the party interface Jason had given them all access to. Emi’s status screen allowed them to realise that Jason’s power would let them know when Emi could safely absorb essences, saving them from a periodic, if cheap and simple testing ritual.

“So,” Jason asked. “Who goes first?”

Hiro and Ian both turned to Erika.

“Oh, great,” she said.

“It’s fine,” Jason said. “I’ve done this before, Farrah’s done this before and it’s a nice, safe ritual.”

Jason picked up one of the nine essences on a table beside him and led his sister to the middle of the ritual circle, avoiding the lines and the small piles of spirit coins. He handed her the essence.

Item: [Feast Essence] (unranked, uncommon)

Manifested essence of bountiful consumption (consumable, essence).

- Requirements: Less than 4 absorbed essences.
 - Effect: Imbues 1 awakened feast essence ability and 4 unawakened feast essence abilities.
 - You have absorbed 0/4 essences. Once absorbed, an essence cannot be relinquished or replaced.
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“We’re starting with the feast essence,” Jason told her, “because we’ve chosen the order to do the best job of setting your powers in the direction we want them to go.”

Jason and Farrah had debated the relative merits of the common feast essence versus the higher-rarity hunger essence. Hunger was the more popular of the two because it had a stronger combat role, often producing an arsenal of drain attacks. For this reason, they had gone with the more broadly-aspected feast essence, given the goal was a power set built around cooking magic.

“In isolation, for example,” Jason explained, “the knife essence, which is next, could very easily give you some mundane special attack. With a feast essence under your belt, though, that next power is more likely to go in the direction we want.”

“There aren’t any guarantees, however,” Farrah said. “We can try and guide the direction for the powers you get, but being too rigid will only backfire.”

Although they had already seen Taika go through the process, Jason’s family watched with fascination as Jason conducted the ritual and the essence cube melted, sinking into Erika’s flesh.

- You have absorbed [Feast Essence]. You have absorbed 1 of 4 essences.
- Progress to iron rank: 25% (1/4 essences).
- [Feast Essence] has bonded to your [Recovery] attribute, changing your [Recovery] from normal to [Iron 0]. Master all feast essence abilities to increase your [Recovery] attribute.
- You have awakened the feast essence ability [Feeding the Multitudes]. You have awakened 1 of 5 feast essence abilities.

Ability: [Feeding the Multitude] (Feast)

- Conjuration (boon).
- Cost: Varies.

- **Cooldown:** None.
- **Current rank:** Iron 0 (00%).
- **Effect (iron):** You can replicate an amount of food up to a plate's worth. Mana cost increases with each replication of the same food, with the cost significantly reduced if the food was prepared by you personally. The taste of the food is identical to the original but nourishment and magical effects can only be copied by expending a spirit coin for each perfect duplication. You can replicate food made with normal or iron-rank ingredients, with the appropriate rank of spirit coin required for true replication.

“Right in the sweet spot,” Jason said. “That’s exactly the kind of power we’re looking for.”

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- **Human racial ability [Essence Gift] has evolved to [Gourmet & Gourmand].**

Ability: [Gourmet & Gourmand]

- **Transfigured from [Human] ability [Essence Gift].**
- **Your senses of taste and smell are enhanced. You may have an additional enhancement effect from magical food without negative effect. You process the remnant magic from potions at an accelerated rate, allowing you to safely consume further potions of the same type after a shorter delay.**

Jason and Farrah shared a glance. They immediately recognised that Erika's abilities were both heavy on resource consumption, a risk Farrah had warned of when they chose the feast essence. In the other world, it would not have been a problem. On Earth, she would be deeply reliant on Jason to supply her with what she would need. If her awakenings continued in this vein, it would add a new wrinkle to the discussion over Erika's family joining them on the return to Pallimustus.

The ritual room balanced out the magic as Jason cleared the ritual circle and drew a fresh one. Erika's remaining essences were absorbed one after another, with results in line with what they were hoping for.

“As long as we aren't too specific with our objectives,” Farrah said, “organising a general direction for powers isn't that hard.”

“Clive told me much the same thing,” Jason said.

From the knife essence, Erika gained the power to conjure multiple knives of various types, from combative to culinary in purpose. From the dance essence, she gained the power to telekinetically control small objects and the ability to split her concentration over

them. Her confluence essence, bounty, gave her the power to imbue ordinary food with magical effects.

“How do you feel?” Jason asked as her confluence essence appeared and was absorbed.

“Amazing,” Erika said. “I feel like I could run a marathon.”

As soon as she said it, her face was stricken with a startled and queasy expression. Jason and Farrah pointed at the shower room door and she bolted for it. Ian moved to go after her and Jason stopped him.

“You may not want to see your wife like that.”

“She’s my wife and she probably needs me,” Ian said. “It doesn’t matter how I see her.”

They watched Ian follow into the shower room, hearing some very unpleasant sounds emerge during the short moment the door was open.

“He’s a good husband,” Farrah said.

“Yep,” Jason said. “He’s one of the good ones, alright.”

Jason then turned to Hiro.

“Alright, Uncle,” he said. “Looks like you’re up.”