

## Chapter 75:

### Progress

“So,” Clive asked, “the original sanguine horror came from the full creation process? The sacrifice chamber, the alchemy pit, the whole thing?”

As he talked, he enthusiastically gesticulated with a fork, a piece of fried sausage skewered onto the end.

“The whole thing,” Farrah said.

The large suite shared by Farrah, Gary and Rufus included a space with a large dining table. The three of them, plus Jason and Clive, were eating the breakfast Jason had brought upstairs from the inn’s kitchen. Gary was excavating the small hill of sausage, egg and fried vegetables on his own huge plate while Jason and Rufus ate quietly. Farrah and Clive were caught up talking, having barely picked at their food.

“I’d love to see that chamber,” Clive said.

“I’m not going to stop you,” Farrah said, “but it’s way out in the desert, so I’m not going to take you there, either.”

“And the awakening stone came from the horror itself?” Clive asked. “Produced by your looting ability, Jason?”

“That’s right,” Jason said. “You keep waving that sausage around and it’s going to end up on the other side of the room.”

“What?” Clive said, then looked at his fork as if surprised to find it there. He bit off the piece of sausage.

“What I find interesting” Farrah said, “is that a summoned familiar is created through completely different means than the sanguine horror we killed. Yet, that’s what Jason summoned.”

“A good thing they’re different,” Rufus said. “We wouldn’t want a sanguine horror roaming around at full strength.”

“Well,” Clive said, “it is possible that if Jason ever reached diamond rank, his familiar would attain the full strength of a sanguine horror. Of course, it would still be under his control, thus would be unlikely to scour all life from the planet.”

“I actually think I figured out what they wanted the horror for,” Farrah said.

“And you’re only telling us now?” Rufus asked.

“Well, I’ve been going over that book from the sacrifice chamber,” Farrah said. “As it turns out, you can get a non-summoned sanguine horror as a familiar. First, you have to make the thing, which they did. Or we did, whatever, but you start by making the thing, and

then you have to starve it. It starts at bronze rank, that's how it was when we fought it, but it goes down to iron rank if you leave it long enough."

"Can you do that with other monsters?" Jason asked.

"No," Farrah said. "The sanguine horror comes with the inherent ability to shift ranks, which normally means going up, but down is possible too."

"There are other monsters like that," Clive said. "They're all quite rare, though."

"Very," Farrah agreed. "So, once you have your sanguine horror, and you've starved it down to iron rank, you get the right essence and awakening stone and then hope you get a familiar bond essence ability. There are no guarantees, of course."

"Which essence and awakening stone are best?" Clive asked.

"For top reliability," Farrah said, "according to the book, a blood essence and an apocalypse stone are what you're looking for."

"That's exactly what I used," Jason said. "Why bother with all the big chamber and the sacrifices when you can just get one? Are the made ones better than the summoned ones? Do I have a defective familiar?"

"The actual sanguine horrors would be the same, in terms of abilities," Farrah said. "The difference would be the same as between any bonded familiar versus a summoned familiar."

"Which are?" Jason asked.

"Bonded familiars survive, even if the essence user dies," Clive said.

"A summoned familiar won't survive the death of the summoner," Farrah agreed. It also can disappear into the summoner's body, which bonded familiars can't."

"That's alright then," Jason said. "I'd hate having to carry Colin around in a bag or something."

"I still can't believe you named an apocalypse beast Colin," Rufus said.

"Well if you call your apocalypse beast Gorgos, the Enslaver of Worlds, then people are likely to start questioning your intentions," Jason said.

"That's actually a good point," Farrah said.

"I have to imagine reliability is the key factor that led them to make the sanguine horror themselves," Clive said. "When going for a bonded familiar instead of a summoned one, things are much more likely to go your way, if you prepare accordingly. So long as you have the creature on hand and use the right essence and stone combination, that is as close as you'll come to a guaranteed result with any awakening stone. Look at your friend Humphrey and his dragon. I guarantee the Geller's didn't leave anything to chance."

Jason scowled.

“They had a little bit of a tiff,” Farrah said.

“It wasn’t a tiff,” Jason said. “It was a philosophical disagreement.”

“Of course it was, sweetie.”

“Actually, there’s something I’ve been wondering about,” Jason said. “The sanguine horror we fought was vulnerable to salt. I checked, and my familiar is the same. So how would it kill all life in the ocean, which is full of salt?”

“Those vulnerabilities would eventually go away,” Farrah said. “That book has a lot of details about sanguine horrors. It starts off a bronze rank, which is where we fought it, and has some extreme vulnerabilities at that stage. Fire and salt are the big ones, along with esoteric ones that only essence abilities can produce. But those vulnerabilities go away as it grows stronger. Salt stops being an issue once reaches gold rank, after which it can go swimming all it likes.”

“I’d love to get a look at that book,” Clive said.

“Why didn’t Anisa take it?” Rufus asked. “She was collecting everything.”

“From the manor,” Farrah said. “We weren’t in the manor when we found it, so she had no right to it.”

“I’m not sure she would agree,” Gary said. His first contribution to the discussion coincidentally came right after his huge plate was emptied.

“He’s right,” Rufus said. “There’s no way she would have quietly let you take it.”

“That’s why I didn’t tell her,” Farrah said.

“Good call,” Jason said. “I still think there was something shady going on with that woman.”

“Didn’t you say she was a priestess of Purity?” Clive asked.

“Exactly,” Jason said.

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“It’s been a while since we’ve all been here together,” Rufus said as they stood in the yard behind Jory’s clinic. There was less space than in the past, with construction materials taking up much of the room. Jory had purchased the large building next to the clinic, and renovations were in full swing.

Like Jason, Rufus Gary and Farrah had all been carrying out contracts. Some they did together, others alone as they each pursued other projects. Rufus had preparations for his academy's joint venture with the Gellers, while Farrah had been undertaking work for the Magic Society. Gary had been exploring the use of local materials in crafting weapons and armour. He sold the work he was satisfied with at the trade hall, with no small

success. The rune tortoise shield he made with Farrah had auctioned well, getting him a lot of attention.

They started with weights training, which left Jason feeling inadequate. Rufus was bad enough, with the strength of a late-stage bronze ranker, but Farrah and Gary were worse. Farrah had a strength power from her earth essence and Gary's race were all physically powerful. They were lifting half-ton barbells in each hand, while at least Rufus had the decency to struggle with one. By comparison, Jason was an out-of-shape guy in his first week at the gym.

The others stopped to cool down as Jason headed inside, using his power to help the waiting patients. With clinic hours reduced by the expansion and Jason often away on contracts, the clinic was more busy than ever.

"Haven't seen those friends of yours in a while," Jason said to Jory. "The fighter didn't get hurt too badly, did she?"

They had just healed up a pit fighter who had been cursed by an opponent.

"No, she's out of the pit fighting game again," Jory said. "Haven't seen them in a while."

Back outside, Rufus was waiting for Jason.

"Time to see if those skills have atrophied," Rufus said.

"Actually," Jason said, "I've been working on something. My martial art, The Way of the Reaper..."

"What's wrong?" Rufus asked.

"Just saying it out loud makes me realise how over the top that name is. Where did you say that skill book came from?"

"I didn't say," Rufus said.

"Not like it matters," Jason said. "I'm a kung-fu wizard of darkness and blood. The good ship Chuunibyou has well and truly set sail."

"Were you approaching some kind of point?" Rufus asked, "or were you just going to stand there and spout nonsense?"

"He's done it before," Gary said, prompting a hurt look from Jason.

"He's done it a lot," Farrah added.

"Farrah, you too?" Jason asked.

"You were saying something about your martial art?" Rufus asked impatiently.

"Right, yes," Jason said. "So, my martial art has five forms. Different approaches, different situations. At first, I thought it was about choosing the right form for the right enemy. Then I spent a lot of time fighting people in the mirage arena."

"I heard about that," Rufus said. "Danielle said she had a recording to show me. I heard you were challenging all comers for most of a week. What did you learn in that time?"

"That the Gellers really teach their kids how to fight," Jason said. "I lost a lot of times."

"What else?" Rufus asked.

"Only using a fifth of your martial arts is like... only using a fifth of your martial arts. The forms aren't just five mini martial arts bundled into a skill book anthology. It was only when I started mixing things up that I realised the key to the whole thing."

"Which is?" Rufus asked.

"The real trick to the style is understanding how and when to move between forms. A well-timed, well-executed change in approach can clinch a victory."

Rufus took up a fighting stance.

"Show me."

Rufus was faster and stronger, with more skill and experience. In all their time training, Jason had never landed more than a glancing blow. Not only did this latest sparring session follow the same pattern, but Jason was performing worse than he had since the early days. Farrah and Gary were watching from the side, using piles of bricks as furniture.

"I'm not impressed," Rufus said after knocking Jason into the dirt again. "You're full of openings, more than when you first used the book. I think your attempts to change things up are making you lose what the book gave you in the first place."

Jason picked himself up from the dirt, body aching from the punishing lesson. He brushed himself down and resumed a fighting stance.

"Prove it," he said.

Spectating from the side, Gary chortled.

"It's on now," he said.

Jason's clear eyes locked on Rufus, who shook his head.

"Some people need the truth beaten into them," he said.

He came at Jason, hard and fast. Jason floundered back, narrowly avoiding a clean hit while almost tripping over his own feet. Rufus held the momentum ruthlessly, pushing Jason into a corner both figuratively and literally. Jason stumbled as a finishing blow came ramming at him, but then his body shifted. Rufus's blow hit nothing but air as Jason shunted into his body, pushing Rufus off-balance. Jason's elbow crashed into the side of Rufus' head, ringing it like a bell.

Rufus staggered and Jason pressed, but suddenly Rufus was moving twice as fast and a fist slammed into Jason's gut, doubling him over and lifting him right off his feet. An elbow was crashing down on the back of Jason's head, but Rufus stopped it before he smashed open Jason's skull. Jason collapsed to the ground anyway.

"Good," Rufus said, stepping back.

"Doesn't..."

Jason barely got a hoarse word out before a coughing fit sent blood speckling into the dirt. He pulled a healing potion from his inventory and tipped it down his throat.

"I think you might have gone a bit hard, there, Rufus," Gary said.

"He did well," Rufus said. "Made me use my full strength for a moment. It was good."

"Doesn't feel good," Jason croaked.

"On your feet," Rufus said coldly.

"Come on, Rufus," Farrah said. "You hit him so hard he had to drink a potion."

"Which he did," Rufus said. "So now he can get up."

Rufus walked over to where Jason was still laying in the dirt.

"This is where he gets to choose," Rufus says. "Is he going to be adequate, or is he going to be great? Stand up or lay down. What's it going to be, Jason?"

Jason pushed himself up and onto his feet.

"You know," he said, "Instructor Rufus is kind of a prick. Haven't you heard of positive reinforcement?"

"All those openings you were showing," Rufus said. "They're a trap."

"Well, some of them are traps," Jason said. "It took you a while to go after the right one."

"Only once you close all those real openings will you have made the style your own," Rufus said.

"No," Jason said. "Once I transform every opening into a trap, *then* I've made it my own."

Rufus grinned.

"I like the ambition. You have a lot of work to do."