

CHAPTER 47 – BLOOD FEAST

A naked old man ran through the woods.

This was not good.

Neither for the old man, nor the trio of ex-dock workers chasing him with hooks and chains. And it was decidedly unpleasant for any silent watchers lurking about who bore witness to the effects of age on the human form.

Since the apocalypse, James Candle (of hitherto Candle Bros. fame) had been beaten, stabbed, hog-tied, and generally mistreated by every person he came across.

When the integration into the multiverse happened, James had been at his family's summer estate in the Hamptons. Surrounded by wealthy families of good breeding, he should have been perfectly safe among the well-intentioned company when they were transported to their tower ruin.

Instead, all the old ugly feuds broke out and things only grew worse from there. James had worked with his brother Joseph to build their father's company into an empire of scented candles known the world over.

At 74 years old, he was still young enough to remember what it was like to work for a living. Most of the families he associated with nowadays didn't.

That first night, when there was no food, no water, and monsters were closing in, some people broke. They fled into the darkness, never to be seen again.

Others started attacking each other, claiming that people were holding out secret caches of food. They were right, but not in the way that anybody had thought of.

It wasn't until they came across the body of Florence McGavin, carved up by some monster and left to cool on the cobbled streets of a ruined city, that Brent suggested jokingly that they could eat her remains.

He seemed to mention it in an off-the-cuff manner. The way he continued to back up his point by mentioning various instances of human cannibalism in extreme and dire circumstances worried James.

Of course, nobody took him seriously, and they continued on camping in a nearby ruin for the second night as the screams and horrors of the night moved around them.

James returned to Florence's body in the dead of night, intent on giving her a proper burial under a cairn, when he came upon Brent bent over the body.

The young man looked up at James with horror and shame in his eyes just as a soft voice called from the dark, "I found a sharp rock we can use to carve—oh, Mister Candle! H-how are you? Pleasant evening we're having?"

James turned to Thomas Spencer, inclining his head politely because even in moments of extreme terror and horror, there was room for manners.

Thomas braced himself and cleared his throat. "Could I offer you some refreshments?"

James meant to tell him what poor taste that was. Then his stomach growled angrily at him, and he noticed the way Thomas gripped the shard of stone in his hand.

Even in the wan light, James could do the dreadful algebra of his own survival. If he declined, *he* would be food.

"Very well," James said stiffly, "I never was one to turn down a free meal."

The tension bled out of the young man. “Good on you, sir. Let’s tuck in, eh?”

“It’s not so bad once you get used to it,” Brent said later. He pointed to something wobbly. “A bit like pate, but... well, obviously not.”

As horrified as James was at what they all were doing, he was perhaps even more bothered by the effects it had on him.

James was an old man. He had a full young life spent with a little too much working and not enough living, but he wouldn’t have done it any other way.

Only now... after eating, he felt *strong*. The last time he remembered feeling like that was when he was in his thirties back in the 80s and somebody had introduced him to the fine powdery substance that fueled most of wall street.

It wasn’t just the high, it was the lingering aftereffects. Either Brent and Thomas didn’t feel it, or they were so young still that they couldn’t tell the difference.

For James, it was as if he had just rewound the clock 15 years. His thoughts were faster, clearer, less occluded with rubbish that made him feel his age more than any cane ever could.

He felt sick, but at the same time he couldn’t help himself going back for seconds. And that was when something within was awakened.

Title earned: [All You Can Eat]

While others are repulsed by the need to consume any form of sustenance to survive, you are empowered by it. You understand that there is no difference between an animal bred for the purpose of food and that of a monster or even a fellow human. Your willingness to survive has given you an edge few others would employ. Your Marks have been updated. You gain the [Blood Feast] skill. +10% Vitality.

Skill gained: [Blood Feast]

(Unique Race Skill)

All creatures require sustenance to survive. You merely see sustenance no matter if it moos at you, or asks you how your day has been. The lack of this very crucial difference has allowed you to cross over into a territory few venture. As reviled as it is, cannibalism is not without its perks. You gain Vitality and experience when feasting in this way, and quickly recover HP. The more you consume, the greater the gains. There is still time to turn back.

James ran away from his crimson fate that night, afraid of what he would become if he stayed. That last line had sounded like a written plea from the System, and it terrified him.

He wanted to be good. Not a monster.

Unfortunately, he was captured, beaten, and trussed up by a group of bandits that thought torturing an old man would be fun.

He regretted his lack of conviction, realizing that in this world, power was all that mattered. That was why, days later, after his tormentors thought him suitably broken and came to finish the job, James bit the throat out of his cruel executioner.

The subsequent feasting strengthened him. Now with a full belly and several levels under his belt, James bolted into the woods where the rest of the rough man's fellow dock workers were quick to chase.

But not quick enough to notice that James was not quite as slow as once was, and that he was intentionally staying just ahead so they could keep visual contact.

These boys were not hunters, they were street toughs that thought with their fists. When James disappeared within the forest at the edge of the ruins, they had no idea what sort of hell awaited them.

Luke finally surfaced from his self-induced k-hole of study and repetition.

As usual, when he finally returned to the land of the mundane and living, he felt confused and disoriented. His mind spun with everything he had been stuffing into it.

Once he was cleaned up and had some more food, Luke felt marginally more human. In the grand scheme of what lay before him, he had forgotten to review the Apprentice Runegraver's skills.

As he chowed down on sliced meat very reminiscent of salami, Luke reviewed what his Apprentice Runegraver profession offered.

Skill gained:

[Novice Runegraving (Common)]

(Apprentice Runegraver Profession Skill)

A Runegraver is nothing without their ability to carve runes into appropriate receptacles. Your ability to draw and tap into the Precursor runes upon which much reality is founded is all that stands between a Runegraver and an artist making pretty shapes. Adds a slight bonus to the influence of Perception and Dexterity stats when using this skill.

Luke considered [Novice Runegraving] to be an essential, core skill of the profession. It highlighted the importance of his Dexterity and Perception stats well.

He was pleased that it started at common-rarity, rather than at the very bottom of crude-rarity. The skill could certainly be stronger, but his profession seemed to be so advanced that starting out at common-rarity appeared to be a rather good thing to Luke.

Skill gained:

[Instill Rune (Common)]

(Apprentice Runegraver Profession Skill)

Instilling runes is the process of activating their effects, allowing the power within to come to the fore. Even when properly graven, runes require instilling to work. Adds a slight bonus to the influence of Arcane, Willpower, and Wisdom stats when using this skill.

Luke understood that this crafting profession wasn't as simple as forging a sword. While [Novice Runegraving] required physical stats, [Instill Rune] relied upon magical stats. His Arcane and Wisdom were certainly lacking. He had a lot of room to grow in that area.

While his combat class didn't make much use of Arcane and Wisdom, his bloodline powers certainly did. By raising his Apprentice Runegraver profession, his bloodline would grow to be much more effective.

It'll be nice having an MP pool that isn't incredibly small, Luke thought before moving onto the next crafting skill.

Skill gained:

[Bind Rune (Common)]

(Apprentice Runegraver Profession Skill)

Though boundless in possibility and power, a rune that is not properly bound is one that is open to sabotage and alteration, often to disastrous effect. Binding a rune sets its shape and adheres it to its frame, where its power can flow and join with the frame's material. Adds a slight bonus to the influence of Willpower and Arcane when using this skill.

Another common-rarity skill. The System seemed to equate his aptitude for Runegraving to be competent, but not necessarily accomplished.

With knowledge beamed into his brain from gaining the skill and the additional studying from his books, Luke regarded [Bind Rune] as the third step of the enchanting process.

Enchanting was the core of Rune-graving. If he were ever to sell his crafted goods, he might use that more generally understood term to explain what he was offering.

The [Bind Rune] skill allowed him to seal the effects of a rune in place and lock it into its graven pattern. It would be less likely to degrade and deform over time. If he wanted a rune to last on a piece of equipment, using that skill was mandatory.

Without it, aside from the potential mana instability, the created rune might behave more like a variable than a static value.

Luke didn't much care for the possibility of his boots randomly exploding in the middle of battle. The monster already would be trying to kill him. His boots shouldn't be another threat to contend with.

Skill gained:

[Raze (Common)]

(Apprentice Rune-graver Profession Skill)

All runes require flux to operate, a universal magical reagent that brings out various properties of a given rune based upon the type of flux used. Raze allows you to break down most materials into their most basic component: flux. Adds a slight bonus to the influence of Willpower and Arcane when using this skill.

All useful, but he had been right to wait until now to go over them. If only because he would have been tempted to use both [Bind Rune] and [Instill Rune] as soon as he learned his first few runes.

From the books he was reading, Luke knew what to do with [Raze], and how it fit in with that weird storeroom full of junk.

To Luke's eyes, the junk room now looked like a treasure trove of goodies to be looted.

Luke spent a day and change, working feverishly to master the first 3 runes he came across. Whoever had worked here had thought they were important, and he was inclined to agree with them.

Now he could make full use of [Raze] without having to wait until he knew what runes to use. While it created a necessary delay, he could now immediately begin using the runes he learned instead of wasting precious flux.

He had the sinking feeling he was going to need more than the room could provide.