

CHAPTER 15 – DIVERGENCE

Slipping a throwing knife out from his belt, Luke took aim and threw the weapon at the lamp holder's hand as he rolled out of bed.

There was a muffled curse and a shatter of glass, followed by a faint crackle of light as whatever powered the magical lantern broke.

Velvet-black darkness descended on the room, but there was just enough light for Luke to see. Unlike the two murderers, whose night vision was ruined by the lantern they held, Luke had kept one eye closed to preserve as much of his as possible.

He was up on his knees, taking out two more throwing knives and chucking them into the unarmored legs of his assailants.

A crumbling sound, followed by tiny purpose-placed pebbles falling onto a piece of wood that made a hollow sound, told him that he had more company. This time from the window.

It had been a last-minute bout of paranoia. Nobody could have climbed out onto the *exterior* of the tower, but he had been wrong.

Did they have some sort of skill that let them scale such heights? Or were they able to do that with stats alone? If that attacker possessed higher Dexterity than Luke, he was in trouble.

The window was small. It'd slow down the newest attacker, but it wouldn't matter if he couldn't take at least one of these guys down before then.

"Get him!" hissed one of the beefy Gladiators. They wore heavy armor breastplates, but the assessment hadn't been going on for long. The Company Store wasn't even open yet, so whatever equipment they had was likely scavenged or what they started with.

Luke's weapons couldn't get past their heavy bronze breastplates, but their limbs were fair game. He whipped out two more knives and used his [Lacerate] skill as he let them fly from his hands.

A faint purple-red aura limned the edge of the small blades, giving them a demonic hue as they struck true.

Drawing his scimitar, Luke rolled forward beneath the powerful downward strike of the first Gladiator that already had his sword out.

The stones sparked when the Gladiator's sword cracked into them, impressing Luke with the man's strength. The stone crumbled around the edge as if it was plaster.

Using [Fleet of Foot] to give himself an extra burst of speed, Luke struck up into the first man's groin with the pommel of his scimitar.

Now wasn't the time to fight fairly. This was two-on-one, soon to be three-on-one. Only heroes in stories faced odds like that and won. He would be lucky if he could survive these two.

Even still, he winced when the man let out an unsettling gurgling sound as the attack struck home.

Luke didn't waste more time on the Gladiator as he doubled up. He tumbled forward, tucking his blade close to his chest and keeping it flat. He prayed to whatever gods there were that he didn't cut himself because his sword was pointed toward his feet, and he really wanted kids one day.

Glass scraped and cut his arm as he rolled over the remains of the lantern, but he managed to get around to the side of the Gladiator who had been holding it.

Another knife came out from his belt. It glowed purple-red as he used [Lacerate] to cut the back of the man's leg behind the knee.

He had no idea how to hamstring somebody, but clearly, he struck *something* because the man sagged and tumbled to the side, his leg no longer able to support him.

Luke reacted purely on instinct. He rolled on top of the man, glowing knife still in hand. He jammed it into his throat with all the force he could bring to bear one-handed.

Something shifted in the shadows. He barely had time to begin moving before a heavy boot landed hard on his ribs and sent him crashing into the closed door.

It rattled, echoing the feeling in his head. He struggled to get to his feet as the first Gladiator bore down on him. *Can't stay on the ground*, he chided himself.

He only just managed to get his sword up in time to parry the killing blow, but he hadn't noticed the red glow around the blade.

The parry had been clean. Perfectly executed. Yet, when the red aura around the blade grazed his arm, Luke let out a yelp. Pain blossomed like fireworks all along his limb as if he had rolled around on hot coals.

Luke ducked to the side, moving five precise footsteps to the exterior wall so that he was backlit by the faint starlight from his narrow window. There was just enough light for his attacker to see him by.

Instead of raising his sword and attacking again, the Gladiator lowered it, bracing the handle in both hands. Luke had to give it to the man, he was well trained before coming here. His ally was gurgling his final moments on the ground and not once had he checked on him.

A green glow sprang up around the Gladiator. Luke felt a sense of danger spike so sharply that he thought he had been stabbed for a moment before he realized it was coming from the man in front of him.

Luke took a measured step back, praying that he had remembered right. The Gladiator charged him, a faint trail of green light flowing off his shoulders. He bulled ahead at full steam, far faster than his bulk would have suggested, but not nearly as fast as he should have been.

The blood pooling around the man's ankle from the wound in his thigh was doing its work, slowing his footwork enough that Luke could get out of the way if he needed.

Luke danced to the side as the Gladiator hit the thin pile of smooth pebbles Luke had placed near the window. Unable to stop himself, the Gladiator was carried forward by a mixture of his own magical inertia and the pebbles beneath his feet.

Just as the third assassin finally managed to slip into the room.

There was a grunt, a clang of metal on stone, and a distressingly familiar gurgling sigh.

Luke ignored the notification that popped up. He got around behind the Gladiator and drew a line across the backs of his knees with his blade in one smooth motion.

And before he could stop himself, he had a handful of the man's greasy lank hair. Yanking his head back, Luke put the edge of his scimitar against the pulsing artery that stood out like a glowing beacon to him.

"Give me a reason not to," Luke told him. His hands were shaking, but not with fear. He was struggling not to slit the man's throat.

The Gladiator grunted. "You're an Undesirable. Only following orders." He twitched, reaching a hand down out of sight. "You ain't got it in you, pal. Just put it away and we'll talk this out, like gentle—"

The rest of his words came out in a surprised gurgle. He collapsed to the side bonelessly a few seconds later, followed by the third notification of the night.

A gasp drew his attention to a young woman who stood in the doorway holding a small candle and a tray. The door hung open, slightly askew.

How much did she see? Was Luke's first fear-fueled thought.

He raised a hand slowly to her. "Don't be afraid—" was all he could get out before she took a lungful of air to scream.

What that woman must have seen didn't look good.

Instead of the scream that would have brought dozens of guards and loyalists running, she collapsed in a heap.

Luke breathed a sigh of relief, but the feeling was replaced in a rush by dread.

He had heard of people being so afraid they passed out, but he'd never seen it in action. Gingerly, he padded over to her and stubbed out the candle that was beginning to singe her shirt.

For a dark moment, he realized that even if he killed her and looted her body, they'd know what happened the moment the assassins didn't return.

How long did he have? A few hours, maybe? Less?

There was no way to spin this in a positive light. It clearly looked like he just murdered three men in cold blood. It didn't matter that they attacked first and shouldn't have been in this room to begin with.

Even if his core group would have believed him, Marcy would just send more assassins after him.

This was far worse than he ever expected. He didn't think she'd send *assassins* after him right away. He expected somebody to come and rough him up, send him a message.

Not... this.

He had foolishly thought Marcy wanted to toy with him. And on some level, actually wanted him around. Sure, for her own twisted purposes, but still wanted him to stay all the same.

With the eyewitness of the poor girl in the hall, Marcy wouldn't have to do anything. The story practically wrote itself.

Paranoid and jealous ex gets into a fight with guards who try to restrain him and he kills them in cold blood.

There was a chance this wasn't Marcy pulling the strings, and instead, it was Henry's doing. The leader didn't strike Luke as a jealous sort, but maybe he considered Luke as a threat in other ways. This was a new world, and the powerful would surely climb to the top on a mountain of bodies.

Unfortunately, no matter who orchestrated this, the result was the same.

This was incredibly *bad*.

In for a penny, in for a pound, he muttered to himself as he dragged the woman into the room and shut the door. As gently as he could, he set her onto his pallet and went to work looting the bodies.

But before he could, a blinding pain exploded from behind his eyes. He fell to his knees and bit down so hard that he tasted blood. It was all he could do to stop from screaming.

A new notification flooded his rapidly shrinking tunnel vision.

Bloodline Awakened: [Mark of the Shadow Lord]

Bloodlines form the basis of many great Guilds and Sects, even entire Empires. Even among those, yours is exceptional. A Precursor Bloodline, one not seen for eons and unable to be passed on from its original creators due to corruption. The Mark of the Shadow Lord has found its new home in you. Enhances extrasensory awareness within shadow. Grants minor control over shadows. Enhances reflexes and reaction times. +5% Dexterity.

Title earned: [Heritor of Shadow]

Provides access to a unique Bloodline long sought after but never rediscovered. The power of this new Bloodline has generated Marks for you and your lineage to bear as you see fit. What you choose to do with this long-coveted power will decide the fate of more than just your life. You are enmeshed in a greater game than you could ever imagine. +10 Fate, +10% Willpower.

When Luke opened his eyes, the world had changed.

He always had excellent night vision, but this was something entirely else. The room had a faint twilight hue, but other than that, he could make out every detail. Somehow, he knew he could see in this darkness better than in the bright light of day.

What has happened to me?

Something shivered at the edges of his vision, and he focused on this new threat.

Instinct had him clenching a trembling fist. Power flowed through his veins. Darkening shadows crawled across the floor like living things summoned by his will.

Relaxing his grip, the shadows shrank back into the dark edges of the room.

Even with his eyes closed, Luke was supernaturally aware of everything in the room. The shadows felt like an extension of his body. In the same way that he knew where his hands or feet were at any moment, he knew where the four bodies were, and that one of them was alive.

Two thoughts crashed together like trains on the same track: *this could be useful*, which was followed immediately by, *what am I becoming?*

Nesting within his lair at the heart of a supermassive black hole, an ancient dragon with stardusted scales stirred from his age-long slumber and cracked one primordial eye.