

CHAPTER 39 – BLOODLINE

SYNCHRONIZATION

Bubbling darkness swelled around Luke until a complex series of rooms grew up and encased him within stone walls and ceiling all around him.

Okay, this is starting to get into more familiar territory, Luke thought, preparing himself.

In front of him, pillars of darkness rose up through a pool of poisonous green liquid. The only thing he could see with his human eyes was the bilious green liquid that created noxious fumes.

Even from the anteroom he was curled up in, the fumes were giving him a dizzying sense of lightheadedness. The very last thing he wanted to do was touch that liquid.

Switching his vision to the extrasensory awareness of shadows, Luke saw a very different scene.

The pillars were staggered throughout the room, providing a way across and a path forward through the F-Grade Dungeon.

Without his shadow powers, he wouldn't have been able to see those pillars. Someone else in his place would find an easy, brutal death here.

His thoughts lingered on that for a moment. Luke found it doubtful that an intern without his bloodline could have made it this far, let alone discovered the power hiding within that obelisk.

He wondered about the Dungeon's design. Was it originally created to tap into unique bloodline abilities, or had it been transformed

along the way due to his actions and the godly influence of the Discordant Dragon?

If he knew more about the multiverse and the System, he might have been able to confidently answer that question. Sadly, Luke was still new to this all.

Challenge Quest: Runic Convocation

You have been tasked with acquiring all Runic Sigils. Though you only need to acquire a minimum to proceed, the more Runes you collect, the greater rewards you will reap.

Runes Required: 0/6

Runes Collected: 0/11

Rewards? Now that greatly piqued Luke's interest.

A faint voice in his blood spoke to him.

Look for our Mark in Shadow.

Luke frowned, shutting his eyes. Technically speaking, he didn't need to open his eyes to "see" as it were. He could feel the shadows all around him. Sometimes it helped to have his eyes open and sometimes it helped to shut them.

When he shut his eyes, the poisonous green liquid vanished from sight, replaced by a nebulous sense of danger.

Casting his senses around, Luke found the first rune rather easily. It was on the far side of one of the pillars. He never would have seen that rune if he wasn't "looking" for it, and definitely would never have noticed it if he had to rely on his eyes.

Gathering up his strength, Luke got to his feet. He felt healthy and whole, as if the pain and fever had been a terrible dream.

Luke leapt from a standing start onto the first pillar. It was higher up than he thought, but he managed to scramble on top of it and lay flat on his belly as he inched toward the far side.

Even with his Dexterity and [Climbing Gloves], scaling the pillar presented an unusual difficulty. The material was oddly slick, as if it wasn't entirely physical.

Slapping his hand onto the rune in the absence of any better solution, Luke collected the rune. It shone brightly for a moment before vanishing entirely.

Runes Collected: 1/11

Nearly 4 feet to a side, the pillar was easy to stand on without any issue. The problem was that as soon as Luke touched the pillar, it began to sink into the poison below. The pillar was both difficult to climb and began to disappear once he touched it.

I'm on a timer then, he thought. With a quest that wants me to collect a set number of runes, but with an obvious hint that collecting more is possible.

Luke hoped the pillars would begin to rise up again once his weight was off them.

He got to his feet and launched himself at the next pillar in line, then the one after that. Going so fast, he nearly slipped off the pillar's top before he managed to grab on.

By the time he was safely across the room, Luke realized he had missed a rune back there.

Despite his hopes for otherwise, this wasn't like a game where the platforms rose back to full height when you stepped off them. The pillars continued to fall into the fizzing liquid below.

Luke made a split-second decision.

He rushed across the sinking pillars, reaching the second rune inches above the poisonous liquid. Reaching down with the toe of his boot, Luke tapped the rune to collect it, just as the sole of his shoe sizzled.

Pulling himself away as fast as he could, Luke still wasn't fast enough to save the boot. The liquid clung like napalm and liquified the hard sole, forcing Luke to strip off the offending boot as fast as he could and toss it away before the acid devoured his foot.

Feeling distinctly uneven, Luke quickly made his way through the first room with a third of the runes required.

Once he was safe again, he stripped off the second boot. Though he would have loved to keep the boot, he tossed it into the poison.

There was no way he could go around holding a boot forever, and its mate was already consigned to the acid pool.

Luke took a moment to breathe and steady himself. He didn't like standing in stockinged feet, but there was nothing for it. At least the boots hadn't been as useful as his gloves.

Just out of curiosity, Luke stripped off his socks—which were filthy anyway—and lowered one gently into the acid.

Luke quickly pulled his hand back. Where the boot slowly was eaten away by the viscous green stuff, his sock instantly turned into a puff of green acrid smoke.

“The only reason I didn't lose a foot was because my boot had resistance to traps,” Luke reasoned, wriggling his bare toes on the unsettlingly warm stone floor. “Point taken.”

Turning his attention to the next room, Luke was dismayed to see the acid bath returned. It had significantly more pillars that were hardly a foot out of the liquid.

Breathing was becoming more difficult. There was a definite time limit here, even though the System wasn't spelling it out for him. Maybe it would when there was a minute left to live. Luke didn't intend to take that long to find out.

Several more pillars, thin and more like stone poles, were attached to the ceiling. They blocked the easier paths through the room, while also bearing a few runes themselves.

The moment Luke stepped up to the doorway of the room, the poles from the roof began to descend. It didn't take a genius to figure out what was going to happen.

Tapping his [Fleet of Foot] skill, Luke moved with as much speed as he dared. He leapt onto the first sinking platform and then the next. He crossed two more before the first pole bearing a rune on the lowest section was inches away from an acid bath.

Collecting the first rune, Luke surged to his feet. He used the pole, gripping it awkwardly and swinging around, to get to the next rune before it was destroyed.

The rest of the room was easily crossed with his eyes closed as he used his shadow senses to determine the best path ahead. Many of the pillars were weakened and had numerous cracks in the stone that told him they would crumble and break apart the moment he grabbed onto them.

"Four runes down, seven to go," Luke said, panting hard with his palms pressed to his knees. "This is the strangest dungeon I've ever heard of!"

The Discordant Dragon was nowhere to be seen. Why was he in some sort of trial chamber? What was this challenge quest going to lead to next?

What was truly happening to him?

Unsurprisingly, there was no answer. He could have screamed himself hoarse and knew he would receive no reply.

He didn't. He was more than a little afraid that if anybody *did* hear him, it would be that damned auditor.

The next room once more featured the acid pool, which was becoming a bit of a staple now. The platforms were even smaller and less numerous, with wooden poles descending from the ceiling. They forced Luke to leap from one precarious position to the next.

And if that wasn't bad enough, fountains of acid frothed and sprayed upward, barring his path forward until the liquid settled.

Luke danced from one pillar to the next, then skidded barefooted on the slick surface of the stone as a spray of acid reared up inches from his face. Droplets peppered his cloak that sizzled and ate holes in the stout material.

By the time Luke made it halfway through with 2 more runes, his cloak had repaired itself like new. Without that upgrade ticket, his cloak would have been long gone.

“I love this thing. I didn't even need to instill any mana!”

He hadn't tested whether it would get dirty and stay dirty. At least any minor damage he incurred would be repaired quickly.

Coming from a penny-pinching college experience where he often wore clothes until they had more holes than he had fingers before replacing them begrudgingly, the self-repair was a godsend.

Squatting on the slowly sinking pillar barely more than a foot wide, Luke's attention had lapsed, but his ability to sense in the shadows hadn't.

A sudden spike of alarm made him go cold and Luke found his reflexes kicking in. Before he knew what the hell was going on, he was already leaping toward the next pillar, then the one after that.

A horizontal spray of acid from a concealed hole in one of the walls shot out. It melted the pillar where he had been crouched just a fraction of a second ago.

Luke didn't bother to linger after that. Acid spun itself out like thin webs of liquid from the ceiling, the pool below, and the walls themselves like he was at one of those expensive fountains in Las Vegas.

Only if he touched the water here, he was going to die.

Anybody else would have perished in that first room, even if they didn't walk blindly into the pool of glowing acid. Even those that had the uncanny ability to see in the darkness would have died by now. It was only Luke's enhanced Perception and Dexterity coupled with his lightning-fast reaction speed and reflexes that kept him one hairsbreadth away from being turned into a runny puddle of Luke soup.

Bloodline Synchronization: 71%

Luke let the notification flow past his vision as he swung around a descending pole. He hopped onto a pillar he knew would shatter the moment he put his full weight on it.

Allowing himself to touch the stone for only a fraction of a second, he leapt to the next solid pillar. The stones shifted beneath his feet and his reflexes made a last-second adjustment so he wouldn't fall into the acid below.

Luke was pressing himself to the very limits of what his bloodline was capable of. Every inch of this last room seemed to be hellbent on killing him.

Sheets of acid flowed across the room on a moving track that swept back, forward, and side to side in a randomized pattern. It forced Luke to make constant adjustments and reflexive moves to narrowly avoid being doused in the deadly liquid.

Picking the path ahead became impossible. He had to make one choice at a time, usually a split-second before he was killed.

Time stretched out like hot taffy. Luke was dialed in.

Every inch of shadow was connected to him in a way that he hadn't been able to perceive before. He could feel where the tracks high above were taking the flowing acid. Though he couldn't tell when they were going to change course, he knew the instant they switched gears.

It was just enough for him to nab two more runes before he landed, panting and breathless, in the anteroom before a large ornate stone door.

Runes Collected: 9/11

Luke turned around to look at the room behind him. The showers of acid turned the pillars to mush. They melted the last few feet into the pool until there was nothing left.

The poles, however, were still descending.

I missed some? Luke shook his head, realizing he had been so focused on *not dying* that he had let two runes slip through his hands.

And then he saw them, nearly 20 feet into the room, slowly descending from the poles high above.

They must have been beyond his ability to notice them when he was so focused on moving through the room. His ability to sense with shadows still relied on him being able to pay attention.

It was an interesting flaw that Luke hadn't taken into account. Just because he could perceive so much more, didn't mean he could process everything simultaneously. He wasn't omniscient.

You already have enough, Luke told himself. *The quest is completed, you don't need the other two.*

He knew it was foolish to the extreme, but he didn't care. This was *personal*.

Luke gathered his flagging strength and leapt for the first pole, just as an oily substance flowed down the pole making his hands lose their grip.