

CHAPTER 33 – BLOODLINE MARKS

Luke struggled to decide between the two Thief skills. One started at unusual-rarity tier, while the other was at uncommon-rarity tier.

That was a massive divide in power.

It should have been a trivial decision, but he was exhausted. He couldn't remember the last time he slept in a bed. Or ate a hot meal. The last few days felt like a fever dream, one moment blurring into the next.

He looked up at Glenn, who was wreathed in a thin nimbus of power. Luke guessed that must have something to do with picking his class evolution.

Good for him, Luke thought, turning back to the pressing matter of his skill selection.

Luke realized that there was another grim factor to be worried about. If Glenn grew too strong, he might become a serious threat if the Archer got any nasty ideas about turning on Luke.

No matter what, Luke needed to stay ahead of his enemy-turned-temporary-ally. His skill choice needed to reflect that goal.

If he was basing his decision on rarities alone, of course [Uncanny Footing] would win. He didn't have anything that strong yet, but it wasn't that simple.

Other than attacking, there were a lot of ways he could use [Feint]. When he thought about using it across various situations, its utility was rather high.

All this mental stalling hardly lasted more than a few seconds. Luke made his choice, based purely on the tactical advantages he could

get out of [Feint]. They were simply too good, including using it as a decoy to avoid taking damage.

As soon as Luke selected the skill, he knew something was profoundly wrong. He felt it deep in his bones, a red-hot pain that felt like his very body was cracking apart at the seams.

Skill gained:

[Feint (Uncommon)]

(Thief Class Skill)

Masters of deceit and misdirection, a Thief is most dangerous when their opponent's attention is diverted elsewhere. A true Thief doesn't just prey on opportune moments, they create them. Summon a phantom image of yourself to distract an opponent in the moment. The closer you are to your opponent the more realistic your feint will appear. Adds a minor bonus to the influence of Dexterity, Willpower, and Perception when using this skill.

Bloodline Marks detected...

!Incompatible skill procurement!

Morph skill?

Warning: Undergoing skill morphing may result in mild discomfort.

Y/N

Luke could feel a building nausea in the pit of his stomach. Skill morph? He didn't quite like the sound of that, but it sounded like his bloodline liked [Feint] even less.

His bloodline suddenly seemed far more dangerous. Was this the corruption the System had spoken of?

He quickly agreed to the morph and was wracked with gut-wrenching pain the likes of which he had never experienced before.

The edges of his vision dimmed as he fought to stay conscious through sheer grit and willpower alone.

Skill morph: 17% complete.

Luke could feel something writhe inside him, just under his skin. His skin felt hot and tight, like it was about to rip open at any moment. He curled up in a ball, barely aware that he had fallen onto his side in the fetal position.

Skill morph: 29% complete.

Rolling waves of heat and pressure melted time into a mutable substance that lost all meaning. He felt like somebody was trying to make a diamond out of him. His entire existence was fully captured in unending pain.

Skill morph: 51% complete.

More pressure. This time, it seemed to come from everywhere at once. His vision blurred as Glenn woke from his meditation on his class evolution.

Luke didn't even have the capability to worry about how vulnerable he must be right now. All it would take from Glenn was the easiest shot he ever made to kill Luke.

Even though Luke had widened the gulf of power between them, it still wasn't large enough that he was immune to anything the Archer could throw at him.

He could bleed out from a shot to the neck just like anybody else.

Skill morph: 68% complete.

Drawn into the lightless abyss of a collapsing star, Luke felt as if he would be simultaneously crushed into oblivion and pulled into a million atom-wide strips.

He could scarcely remember what existence was like before this flaying stretch into infinity.

Skill morph: 79% complete.

There, in the darkness, he felt another presence. Something that uncoiled a long gracile neck, scales flecked with inner starlight.

A great big golden eye with a vertical slit opened. It consumed his entire world. Large enough that Luke could have gone swimming in it or dropped a mansion into its center.

Luke couldn't tell if the onyx scaled dragon was real. Its sheer, overwhelming size defied comprehension, which was certainly beyond his present meager ability to process sensory information.

Skill morph: 87% complete.

The pressure began to lessen. Something snagged the back of his neck. He could just imagine a pair of impossibly large claws like an earth mover's bucket pinching him and lifting him to get a better look.

The weight threatened to crush his entire existence. In the claws of the dragon, he felt like an ant being picked up by a god the size of a planet.

Skill morph: 99% complete.

Another, more insistent tug behind his navel, and a taste of blue raspberry candy cut the examination short.

Luke was thrust away from that colossal golden eye and the crushing pressure finally lifted.

When he came to, Glenn was kneeling beside him, holding him on his side in the recovery position. He was soaked in sweat as if he had jumped into a pool, and everything felt suddenly airy and ephemeral. As if he could float away at any moment.

Skill morph: 100% complete.

Your [Feint (Uncommon)], altered by the Marks of your Bloodline, has morphed into [Echo (Rare)].

Skill gained:

[Echo (Rare)]

(Unique Class/Bloodline Skill)

Your power over shadow grows. By taking the child-like misdirection of Feint and adding in your Bloodline's unique capacity with shadows, you are able to create Echoes. Echoes look and act identically to you. They are capable of carrying out attacks, interact with the world around you, and to take damage in your stead. An Echo's strength is increased the more shadow you use to create it, as well as the available shadows in the immediate vicinity. Adds a major bonus to the influence of Willpower, Arcane, and Wisdom when using this skill.

Luke's heart thundered away in his chest. He breathed in deep, ragged lungfuls of air.

What just happened to me? Luke's thoughts raced. *That was... I don't know, how much of that was real? What was that thing?*

He would never be able to forget that slitted gold eye. The pressure of its gaze. The weight of that dragon's inspection.

For some reason, Glenn looked concerned. Maybe it was more out of self-interest than anything, since horrible things happening to somebody from picking up a new skill could happen to him too.

"Are gods... real here?" Luke found himself asking, feeling as if he already knew the terrible truth.

"What? Are you alright?" Glenn asked slowly. "What happened to you?"

Despite what had just happened to him that felt like it had encompassed years, Luke was amazed by the morphed skill. It wasn't just a class skill, but a bloodline skill too.

He had a strong suspicion that meant it was stronger than any standard class skill. His bloodline was unique, after all.

As his head cleared, Luke grew more certain that this was the case. Its rarity had vastly outpaced the original version. The stat influence was rated as major, not minor or slight like his other skills.

Even without testing it out, that meant his stats would be dramatically more effective while wielding [Echo].

Furthermore, it complemented his bloodline astonishingly well. The Echoes grew stronger in shadows, and that was exactly what his [Mark of the Shadow Lord] bloodline manifested and manipulated.

Luke frowned. The only problem was that it pulled from his 3 weakest stats.

He didn't just have a new skill to dodge attacks, but to divert them entirely. Maybe he could even do a multi-pronged attack with two other Echoes.

Eager as he was to try it out, there wasn't any need to do so right now. He didn't trust Glenn. Though the man seemed more than willing to forego killing him for the time being, they both knew it was a temporary truce that either one could betray at a moment's notice.

And the less he could give Glenn to report back to Henry and Marcy, the better.

"I'm okay," Luke finally answered thickly. His tongue felt like a wooden board in his mouth. "What were you doing?"

Glenn stepped back and stood up, dusting his hands self-consciously.

Before Luke realized what he was doing, shadows began to gather behind Glenn's back and rise into the faint shape of a human. He got a grip on himself before Glenn noticed.

The shadows melted into the background.

“I was rolling you into the recovery position,” Glenn told him. “My... my uncle used to have seizures.” He stuck out his chin as if daring Luke to make a joke or... well, Luke didn’t know what Glenn expected.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Luke said, slowly getting himself to his feet. He felt like somebody had worked him over with about a dozen baseball bats. “Is that what I was doing? Seizing?”

“Sure looked like it to me,” Glenn told him. He relaxed slightly.

“Well, it felt terrible,” Luke admitted honestly.

“Grand mals can do that to you.” Glenn scuffed the stone with his sneaker. “Not that I’m sure that’s what you had. Was it tied to a class evolution or something? I got mine.” He smiled and then wiped it away quickly, as if remembering who he was talking to.

Luke shook his head. “Skill thing,” he said. “Not sure what the hell it was, truth be told. I already evolved my class a little way back.”

Luke tried in vain to hold himself back from asking about Glenn’s class evolution. He was instantly interested in what an Archer might turn into. He felt a hit of nostalgia, as if he was playing a newly released MMORPG on day one with his friends.

But Glenn wasn’t Luke’s friend.

He could see the same clamped down curiosity in Glenn’s dark eyes. Neither of them broached the subject as Luke looked down one of the tunnels.

“Three tunnels,” Luke pointed out, intent on changing the subject. “You want to bet any of these lead out of here?”

“Not likely,” Glenn told him. “We could split up...”

Luke looked at him. “Do you really want to while we’re trapped down here?”

Glenn hunched his shoulders defensively. “It would mean we had a 66% chance of getting out of here. Besides, if my way ends up being a dead end, I could always track—”

Luke’s eyebrow raised. “Go on.”

“—you,” Glenn finished lamely. “It wouldn’t be too hard, provided I remembered the path I took going in. Ever since coming here, my memory has been improving steadily. I can remember every turn we took to get to you.”

Luke snorted derisively. “I bet you do.” As much as he wanted to be rid of the Archer, he felt somewhat responsible for him. They had come out here for him, after all.

Sure, they had come to *kill* him, but it was still Luke that had pulled Glenn down into this abominable hellscape of smells and horrors.

Better people had been tricked by Marcy. Luke had been. When it came down to it, could he really blame Glenn for listening to her lies?

He tried to keep that in mind whenever his rage bubbled to the fore.

Luke didn’t plaster a fake grin on his face or do any of those little social niceties that you do to help calm another person down. Instead, he looked squarely in Glenn’s eyes and said, “If you go by yourself, you’ll die. You’re what, level 10 or 11 Archer—or whatever it turns into—right?”

Glenn nodded.

With a quick glance at his own status, Luke continued, “I’m level 17. And trust me, every 10 levels monsters get significantly stronger. Those things you were facing were barely past level 10. I’ve been facing down level 25s and up. If we keep going, we’re likely to hit level 30s before long. If you don’t want to die, you might as well come with me.”

Glenn paled, his eyes widening with shock. “You’re already level 17... And you were fighting level 25s *and* winning.”

“Yeah, so?”

“But that’s impossible.”

Luke shrugged, picked a tunnel at random, and said, “Let’s go. Oh, and you might want to pick up some stuff from the Company Shop if you’ve got the points.”