

CHAPTER 19 – STRESS TESTING

It was slow going through the dilapidated warren of passages and rooms beneath the ruin bridge. Luke slipped from one passage into a storeroom, keeping low by a pile of stony debris.

He was forcing himself to move slowly and carefully, keeping his eyes closed so that the only thing he could rely on was his extrasensory ability. That forced him to use it as much as possible.

It was risky training his bloodline like this, but he needed to improve it, and *fast*. Technically, the risk would be immensely greater if he took his time developing his unique power.

The [Mark of the Shadow Lord] had gotten him this far. If he played his cards right, it could push him to even greater heights.

He wanted to discover the depths of his bloodline, no matter where it took him. Never once in his life did he consider himself anything special, and yet when pushed to the brink, this power had awakened.

Perhaps it was somehow connected all along to his uncanny ability to be easily forgotten by others back on Earth.

Luke's original assumption, that shadows required light, had been wrong. In fact, the System either had a different understanding of what shadow was, or it was a misnomer.

The truth was that so long as Luke was in darkness or near it, he could manipulate it. The closer to the darkness, and the deeper it was, the stronger the manipulation.

In complete pitch darkness, his power was at its peak.

It was still an incredibly steep learning curve. He didn't have anywhere near the amount of mana he would need to be able to utilize it effectively in a proper battle, but he was learning quickly.

In the long run, Rogue's stat growth was going to hold back his bloodline. He needed more mana badly, and he wasn't sure how to fix that problem yet. Even if he set aside all those free points for Wisdom, the stat that increased maximum MP, it still wouldn't be enough.

With nothing else to occupy his time, Luke spent every waking moment in the depths of darkness honing his bloodline.

He took to it with the same singlemindedness that had allowed him to graduate amid the pandemic and then to find a job afterwards, when even the Big 4 were laying off droves of workers.

Luke was already level 9, and he was getting better and better at using his shadow manipulation to bind his enemies long enough to kill them with ease.

He didn't even need to use [Lacerate] or [Fleet of Foot] most of the time. If he bided his time until a small cluster of giant rats came into view, he could gather the shadows around their surprisingly sharp, clawed paws and twist them.

There was no other way to describe the action. The shadows thickened and swirled around the creatures' limbs and rooted them to the spot.

They squealed in rage when they picked up his scent, but by that point, it was already over for them. A few quick slices, and they were dead and looted.

What was hardest to train was his enhanced reflexes and reaction time. He had to willingly allow himself to be seen, something that was growing harder to do with his gradual mastery over his bloodline powers.

And if that wasn't bad enough, he had to stand still long enough for them to charge him. The giant rats down here weren't very smart, but what they lacked in brains they made up for with numbers and brawn.

The upper levels nearest the bridge had lower level monsters, but down in the depths they were between levels 8 and 9. He hoped to come across a level 10, but never seemed to.

Luke stepped out into the opening to a rat's nest and waited. The scrabbling and scratching grew louder. He winced and held his ground. He had to get a handle on this.

Reaction time, he understood. It sped up his ability to move in general. It was like he was always under the effects of [Fleet of Foot] at all times, and without the continuous SP drain, too.

Reflexes, it appeared, were different. It was like that test the doctor gave for a physical where they hit your knee with that little rubber mallet that makes your leg kick out.

Luke's bloodline reflexes were like that, but on steroids.

The rub was that he had to *allow* it to happen. If he tried to willingly take control of his body, it would cancel out the reflex. Luke tried to imagine it as a last line of defense.

His enhanced reaction time was the first and foremost, but if that failed, his reflexes would kick in and move him out of danger.

Unfortunately, if he didn't *train* them, they would stay weak and nearly useless. Training reflexes wasn't the easiest thing in the world. It took Luke several bruises and more than a few gashes to be able to get a pattern down enough that he could replicate it over and over.

Unlike his shadow manipulation ability, the reflexes and reaction times didn't cost anything more than whatever stamina it took to move his body around.

In other words, it was practically free.

A trio of giant rats rushed out of the crumbling hole in the wall. Luke could already tell something was wrong. The lead rat was nearly twice the size of the others, and its fur looked spiky and spiny.

Focusing on it, he saw why.

[Gigant Rat - Level 10]

Its eyes glowed a hateful red in the lightless depths, and Luke found his body immediately reacting to the increased threat by diving and rolling to the side.

The charging gigant rat barreled into the stone wall he had been in front of, completely demolishing it.

A glowing aura of power surrounded the creature as it shook off a ton of brick and stone as if it was nothing. Turning to Luke, the gigant rat charged again, this time moving so fast it shot forward like a cannonball.

Luke's reflexes kicked in just in time to get clipped on the shin where he heard—and felt—a sharp, sickening *crack*. Pain lanced up his broken leg as he jolted it by tucking and rolling.

Getting up to one leg, Luke whipped out two [Lacerate] enhanced throwing knives toward the two circling giant rat helpers that had come with the gigant variant.

The skill's [Bleed] affliction visibly triggered on the rats, slowing them down and whittling away at their HP.

He couldn't discern what their HP actually was, since he couldn't see an HP bar on them. If he could, he might be able to figure out what damage numbers he was outputting.

Even without that purple-red effect from [Lacerate], it was easy to notice the affliction's effect over time. Gradually, monsters developed more and more wounds. If the [Bleed] affliction lasted long enough, and he didn't try to finish the monster off up close, eventually they keeled over from blood loss.

Well, it seems I've gotten my wish, Luke thought. Here was a level 10, and the first time it so much as grazed him, it broke his leg.

Seeing no way around it, Luke pulled out his health potion and chugged it down. The effect wasn't as immediate as he would have liked. He managed to buy a little time by peppering the two additional rats with so many throwing knives that they bled to death before they ever got close enough to cause him trouble.

The gigant rat, on the other hand, was shaking out more stone dust from its fur and looking around for Luke. The rats lacked his innate sense of awareness in darkness, but they made up for it with sensitive noses and whiskers.

However, it seemed that whenever the creature crashed into a wall of stone, the pulverized powder stopped it from being able to catch his scent.

And if he kept perfectly still, the rat's whiskers couldn't detect his movement in the air.

Luke stood as still as he possibly could while the gigant rat whipped its head back and forth, trying to get a bead on him. It wasn't going to be easy with all that dust floating around.

Once he felt the warm flood of relief fill his leg, Luke gingerly tested to see if it would hold his weight. When he was sure it would, he gently slipped two throwing knives into his hands.

He took aim, imbued the weapons with the purple-red haze of [Lacerate], and let them fly.

Luke grinned. The gigant rat's ability to sense movement apparently didn't extend to the small throwing knives, and the two blades struck home along its side.

With a squeak of rage, it lunged forward and whipped its firehose-thick tail at a pile of rubble, obliterating it in one blow.

Gotta keep away from it, he thought to himself. The knives were doing their work. Already thick lines of blood were trailing down its side and pooling on the stone floor.

But it was so big he didn't know how long it would take, so he took out two more knives and repeated the process.

This time the rat was paying better attention, and it immediately catapulted toward his location. Tapping [Fleet of Foot], Luke rolled out of the way. As he came up, he whipped two more lacerating knives into the thing's back for good measure.

It wasn't the most glamorous fight. Luke kept up the ranged attacks until he was out of knives from both belts, and then used what was left of his pathetic mana to fill them up again.

When the gigant rat finally keeled over, it was in mid-lunge toward him. It crashed to the ground and skidded to within a few inches of his feet, just as a series of notifications appeared.

You have defeated [Gigant Rat - Level 10]. Extra experience gained for slaying an enemy above your level. 8 LP obtained.

Level Up! Your [Rogue] Class has reached Level 10.

Stat points earned: +2 Strength, +3 Dexterity, +1 Perception, +1 Free Point.

You have Rogue skills to select.

Level Up! Your [Human (G-Grade)] Race has reached Level 5.

Stat points earned: +1 All Stats, +1 Fate, +1 Free Point.

Title earned: [Soloer, First-Class]

Only acquirable by those with the Soloer title, this auxiliary title grants boons specific to soloers. You have proved your mettle against a wide range of threats while completely solo. Whenever you fight an opponent solo, your stats are enhanced based on how much stronger your opponent is up to a limit. Your Marks have been updated.

In the gloom far beneath the bridge and the tower where he was nearly assassinated, Luke's laugh filled the darkness. There was a menacing edge to it that caused the lingering, curious giant rats to flee in terror back to their burrows and nests.

"I really could have used that title a few minutes ago," he complained aloud.

That title was seriously impressive. It could fundamentally change his growth going forward, allowing him to fight progressively stronger and stronger enemies on his own.

Looking over the notifications, he noted that level 10 gave double the LP of the lower levels. With what he knew, he was now pretty certain that the System apportioned more power every 5 levels.

It fit with his current understanding of getting a new class skill every 5th level. Likewise, the monsters had their LP rewards doubled every 5. It started at 2 points, then 4, then 8.

If that held true, level 15 monsters would be worth 16 LP. But the jump in strength from a level 4 to a level 5 seemed much less than the leap from level 9 to 10.

Perhaps every 10 granted even more power? He had never seen a rat use that charging ability before, or really any powers at all.

Feeling more optimistic about his future than ever before, Luke found a wall to rest against, folded his legs, and looked over his newfound skills.