

CHAPTER 40 – BLOODLINE

SYNCHRONIZATION II

Luke reached into his belt and took out a small black throwing knife, driving it as hard as he could into the wooden pole. His [Climbing Gloves] were instantly negated by that oil.

He tucked himself up as high as he could, took out another knife, and drove that into the wood. The slick oil be damned.

Using his knives like climbing pitons, Luke climbed up the pole despite the grease that now coated it and made gripping it all but impossible.

Luke felt like something more was required of him, as if somehow he should be able to cling to the supernaturally slick poles.

He fleetingly searched himself for something more. Was his bloodline not complete? The synchronization certainly suggested that he wasn't fully adapted to his bloodline, but there was no telling when it would be.

He only had a minute or two at best, before the runes, shining brightly on the poles, were dunked into the acid.

Luke was determined to get to them. Unfortunately, they were each on opposite sides of the room.

Leaping from one pole to the next was a difficult endeavor. He managed it by using an extra throwing knife to create a foothold to kick off from while drawing two more mid-leap.

It was the height of foolishness. He knew that, and yet he couldn't let it go. This was a personal affront. He had done everything right, pushed himself to his limits, and still he hadn't gotten everything.

Those runes were *his*.

He wanted those greater rewards. He needed every single rune for that. He pulled and wrenched his concentration away from thoughts of glorious loot and incredibly powerful titles to the lethal task before him.

Eyes shut to focus on his shadow senses, Luke made it back to the middle of the room just as he discovered the impossibility of what he was trying to achieve.

I'd need to be in at least two places at once, Luke thought. Even with the flowing waterfalls of mobile acid on the other side of the room, they would come back toward him soon enough. He could feel the gears shifting, as if they detected his presence.

He *might* get one rune, but both? There was no way. The acid would get him before he was even halfway to it.

Then an epiphany crashed into his mind like a lightning strike from the heavens.

His Echo.

I can be in two places at once!

Summoning up the newest power of his bloodline, Luke struggled to maintain a grip on the small, bare-handled knives he used to cling to the descending poles.

Operating purely on instinct, Luke fumbled his way through using [Echo], creating a shadowy copy of himself from the darkness all around him. With a mental command, the creature leapt through the air with far more grace and speed than Luke could muster.

Being as light as a shadow had its benefits.

Luke found the Echo could easily grip the poles. He cursed himself for not trying to use it sooner. He might have been able to avoid all of this. He had been preoccupied with dodging the acid and getting

through the chamber at breakneck speed, pushing the envelope of his bloodline.

Too late for regrets, Luke told himself. With the Echo on his way to the other rune, Luke began his inexorable progress toward his own target.

With the mobile waterfall of acid now making its way toward him, Luke slapped his hand to the greasy pole and the rune blazing beneath the flowing translucent liquid.

Runes Collected: 10/11

He turned his attention to his Echo and found out the hard way that there was a range limitation. The Echo leapt from one pole to the next and vanished somewhere in between.

Did his Echo salute as it was destroyed? It was too surreal for Luke to be sure.

The shadows uncoiled, breaking apart and snapping back to Luke with a visceral gut-punch. He gasped with alarm.

Luke grimaced. He didn't have time to weather the effects long. He needed that last rune.

The waterfall of acid was picking up speed, and he was still grappling with the disorientation of what had just happened. Luke trusted in his reflexes and leapt from one pole to the other.

Thankfully, his earlier knives stayed put. That made the return trip easier, but there was no way he had the time to go for the next rune.

Judging the distance, Luke summoned his Echo again now that he was in the middle of the room.

It immediately sprang forth, as if waiting for a second chance. The thing barely waited for his orders before it leapt to the next pole, clawed hands outstretched like a pouncing predator.

Watching the waterfall of death move closer, Luke split his focus between the Echo and the waterfall. His Echo was faster, lighter,

and didn't need to worry about gripping the poles. It simply clung to them as only a shadow could. It was like having a summonable Spider-man.

One pole away from the rune, Luke could feel the straining tether that connected them begin to fray. He cursed and leapt to the next pole, knives out to grip onto the greased thing.

His Echo made the final jump and laid a hand on the rune. For a heartbeat, Luke was afraid it wouldn't work, that it had to be *him* to touch the rune.

Runes Collected: 11/11

Challenge Quest completed. All rewards unlocked.

There was no time to breathe a sigh of relief. Luke was already moving. The sound of the acid waterfall was louder than a jet engine in his ears and mere inches away as he leapt from one pole to the next so fast that he had to rely entirely on reflexes to keep himself alive.

By the time he made the final jump, his legs gave out from under him. He collapsed in a heap on the far side as the waterfall of acid rolled right up to the edge and then stayed there.

The curtain of deadly acid obscured his view from the previous room and told him, in no uncertain terms, that he was no longer welcome.

"Fine by me," Luke said, picking himself up from the ground just as he felt a hot burning sensation across his back.

Without bothering to inspect, he ripped off his clothes as if somebody had just told him he had a scorpion on his back. At this point, Luke would have *loved* to have a scorpion, a tarantula hawk, and a bullet ant nest in his clothes instead of what he knew was eating through his Earthly clothes.

Standing there naked except for his boxer briefs, Luke stared.

His Echo leapt through the waterfall of acid, unfazed, and crouched nearby with languid ease, watching him with an inscrutable gaze.

Luke looked at it, then at his clothes. They were slowly melting into a puddle. His cloak was the only thing still intact after a few seconds. He gingerly picked his way around the puddle and picked up the cloak.

It would hardly cover him, but in time, it would repair itself. As it was, it would barely cover his shoulder blades.

Making sure there was no acid on it, Luke donned the cloak once more and looked over at his Echo. "You can't talk, can you?"

There was no reply. It simply looked at him, expectantly.

"I guess you're not really sentient then," he said, looking down at his current pathetic state. The cloak, when fully repaired, would be able to cover him. If he tried to move at more than a sedate stroll, the cloak would billow out behind him revealing his near-nakedness.

It wasn't that he was prudish or afraid of being seen naked, but it wouldn't help his reputation with any people he might find. He was already filthy. Being naked on top of that was a bit too much.

Besides, it was drafty.

"Cool shadow powers guy running around in his underwear," Luke muttered to himself, looking up and down at the intricately carved stone doorway before him. "Sounds like my sort of luck. I'm going to look like a mental patient running around with a bedsheet tied to his shoulders."

To Luke's left was another door leading to a different room and whatever rewards would be given for completing the quest, but not fully. The door was made of simple wood and, though well-made, lacked the grandeur of the thing towering ominously in front of him.

Luke's choice was obvious.

The Echo saluted, staying crouched. If that was in reply, Luke wasn't sure, but that was the highest form of sentience it expressed so far.

“So you are aware then...?” Luke asked slowly.

Unsure of what to do, Luke saluted back.

The Echo remained saluting as it melted into the floor and vanished back into the shadows.

“Right. No more stalling.” Luke pressed his palms against the door and pushed with all his might.

The doors, which you could have placed a 2-lane highway through comfortably, opened without a sound. Dust filtered down from the seam that formed as they spread out and bracketed the room beyond.

A glance to the side at the other smaller door showed that it vanished as soon as Luke opened up the larger, more opulent one.

Guess I can only get one loot room.

Eager to leave his acid trial behind, Luke strode through.

Even to Luke's novice adventurer senses, he could tell this had once been a treasure room of some sort.

Unfortunately, it had been picked clean ages ago. All that remained were several empty daises, steps that led up to a central altar, and a host of cobwebs hanging from fluted pillars glowing with some sort of greenish light that reminded him of glow-in-the-dark toys under UV.

“Any greater rewards here?” Luke asked the room with waning hope.

There was no answer.

“Thought not.”

Gold and silver dust littered the corners of the steps and areas surrounding each dais as if they had once been stacked high with countless piles of treasure.

Luke shook his head and headed up to the altar, the cold stones freezing cold beneath his bare feet. "Some boots would be nice," he admitted sourly.

It was hard not to feel like somebody was playing a cruel trick on him.

On top of the stone altar was a miniature version of the black obelisk that the Discordant Dragon had once studied with reverence.

As soon as Luke touched it with a fingertip, the room shifted.

He was standing in the same spot as the Discordant Dragon, but the room was now filled with gold and treasure beyond belief. Golden light reflected a million times over gave the room a beautiful, ethereal glow.

The Discordant Dragon was setting the mini-obelisk down on the altar and doing something complex with his fingers. Runes were drawn in the air, blazing with an angry, lurid light. They wrapped tightly around the obelisk and the altar.

The air warped and twisted, intent on shrouding the obelisk from any would-be grave robber.

"Like me," Luke said aloud. "Only I could see it. Clearly, whoever took the loot hadn't."

Seeing how much treasure was here, Luke felt a stab of envy. Piles of coins, jewels, and artifacts that gave off their own strange luminescence filled the room nearly to the high ceiling in many places.

There was even a resplendent pair of boots radiating a silvery aura with wiggling white feathery wings. Luke scowled in particular at

them. They were floating even without anybody wearing them. If he could wear those, there'd be no stepping in acid for Luke.

The Dragon, however, only had eyes for the obelisk. He turned, picking his way calmly over the piles of loot that shifted under his feet.

Millions of dollars—if Luke was right that they were pure gold coins—cascaded beneath the Dragon's bare feet without notice. He made his way toward a wall beset by so much bling that it dazzled Luke to look in his direction.

The Dragon tapped out a sequence on the stones and the wall peeled back brick-by-brick, revealing a passage. Luke turned and stumbled through the shifting piles of treasure, clambering over golden goblets, silver-chased wands, and jewels the size of his fist.

Luke managed to get to the Dragon just as he stepped into the tunnel beyond. Torches of golden light sprang up, detecting his presence.

As soon as the Dragon passed through, the vision ended, returning Luke to the here-and-now, facing nothing but a blank stone wall.