

CHAPTER 42 – DARKENING RUNES

Luke summoned a pulse of abyss-black shadows ahead of him like a sonar ping.

Squaring his shoulders, he stepped deeper into the passage. It opened up just a few feet in and split off into multiple paths, each one as narrow and claustrophobic as the last.

As the pulse of shadow rolled forward, golden runes sprang to life, showing him the way.

Grinning beneath his black hood, Luke followed the runes, hoping they weren't going to lead him astray. He could have used his Echoes at each passage, but he doubted he would find his way out before he died of dehydration.

The ring was taxing his MP as it was. Adding Echoes into the mix would be too much.

I really need to increase my Wisdom more, Luke thought.

If he tried to use both, he would need to rest after every second junction. So far, he had already passed 3 in just a few minutes.

This was clearly designed to confuse and disorient anybody without his bloodline. Though how he was supposed to make deep black shadows without the ring, Luke had no idea.

Maybe it was possible with his powers, but the ring amplified them? It did require his bloodline to use, after all.

“Stay the course,” Luke told the darkness.

Minutes turned into hours. Time lost all meaning in the maze of fractal passages that seemed to spiral out into some sort of cursed Mandelbrot set.

What traps there were Luke was able to dodge with ease. They were almost intentionally bad, as if they were there just to make anybody who might have stumbled on the right path second-guess their choices.

The latest were obvious poison darts hidden in the walls. Holes to either side of the hallway were a telltale sign. Luke's extrasensory abilities in darkness allowed him to see the poison-tipped darts nestled within.

"I'd hate to see what the real traps are like," Luke said to himself as he crawled forward beneath them. The floor tile depressed under his knee and the darts shot forward, clanging uselessly against the opposite wall.

He was running low on mana again. He had long since resorted to only using the ring when he came to a junction.

That turned out to be a mistake.

Luke was walking down the hall when he heard an ominous mechanical sound from the walls to either side. Luke dropped to the ground as buzzsaws leapt out from the wall at chest-height and sparked against each other before returning to their hidden slots in the stone.

Even his shadow senses hadn't picked those up.

Only his reflexes had saved him that time. Crawling forward, Luke tapped his ring and sent another pulse of moving shadow. Several glowing runes appeared along the walls, ceiling, and even the floor.

He couldn't read them, but he could guess their meanings. Several of the runes were encased in triangles, which stood out to him as a warning.

Getting to his feet, Luke inched himself forward to the next rune on the ground. The corridor was too narrow for him to take out his longsword easily, so he leaned back to balance his weight and stuck out a toe to press hard just past the rune.

The stone behind the rune moved with disturbing ease. Luke pressed a little harder and saw the other end of the 10-foot-long slab lift up like an oversized seesaw.

If he had stepped on it, it would have tilted down into a pit, or worse. Luke retracted his foot and studied the walls. He was coming to a solution that he really didn't like.

With a deep breath, Luke pressed his arms out as far as they would go to either side. The corridor was narrow enough that he didn't have full range of motion, but it meant he could use the walls to brace himself.

After a few poor attempts, Luke settled on pressing his back to one wall and keeping his feet braced against the opposite. It allowed him to crab walk along the wall without touching the flooring.

It was slow going, and Luke had to keep stopping to rest and check his surroundings for more traps. When he saw another set of runes on the floor, Luke gingerly pressed his foot down beyond them.

The floor held.

Just to be sure, Luke crept forward a little more and stomped his foot down again. It met nothing but solid stone.

With a relieved sigh, Luke slid down the wall to the floor, rubbing his cramping legs to get the blood flowing again.

Countless other traps littered the final three passages, draining Luke's mana and stamina dry by the time he reached another circular room.

Steps descended into the curious room. At its center was a massive arch of flowing water. The rippling sheet of liquid flowed noiselessly from the top of its twisted red frame all the way down to the pool at its base that stayed still despite the pouring water.

Sitting on the steps to catch his breath, Luke studied the room in greater detail. There was no way out that he could see. Even using

the last of his mana to pulse shadows outward – something he was getting quite good at – revealed no further runes or secrets.

The arch beckoned him.

Luke circled the arch, trying to follow the lines of the red stone with his eyes, but they refused. His attention kept sliding away. He had the unnerving belief that the thing was made of a single whole piece twisted in ways that shouldn't be possible.

While the water could somehow be acid in disguise, Luke doubted it. Testing it, he stuck the edge of his cloak into the stream. When it beaded and cascaded off the leather, Luke figured it was safe enough to stick a finger in.

The water was... well, water. Wet and cool, despite the oddly silent nature of it. He cupped his hands and drank gratefully from the water, hardly surprised when it replenished his HP, SP, and MP at the same time with each cool gulp.

He wished he had some method of storing the water. Then he remembered he hadn't tossed his potion bottles. He hastily dug around in his cloak's sealed pockets until he produced 2 intact potion bottles. His cloak clearly protected them, but not well enough because another pocket was full of shards of glass.

Unstopping each bottle, Luke bottled up the water and added a vial from the first [Antidote] he used back before he had the ability to resist most toxins.

Item: [Pristine Water (Unusual)]

(Consumable)

A bottle containing clean water rich with pure unaspected mana and latent Dunamis. While imbibing restores MP and affects Dunamis, this water is usable by many crafting Professions.

“Dunamis?” Luke asked.

Unless he wanted to drain the last 3 [Antidote] vials he still had, that was as much as he could get.

With nothing else for it, Luke stepped through the curtain of water. He kept the hood of his cloak up to keep the majority of the water off, but it ended up being useless.

Gravity shifted the moment he stepped into the arch and Luke found himself falling face-first into a pool of cool water.

He had just enough time to stifle a gasp before he surged out of the water and appeared on dry land again, feeling as if his inner ear was given a twirl on a sped-up merry-go-round.

Staggering in place and struggling to stay upright, Luke drew the silver pen from the depths of his cloak. Despite his dizziness, he managed to twist the end. The runes of light sprang forward from the tip.

He didn't know why he did it until he saw the suited auditor standing in front of him. It paused when its gaze—it was hard to tell with the faceless mannequin creature—settled on the sword.

Luke steadied his feet with the runic sword gripped tightly in his gloved hand. Purple-black shadows crawled along the glowing script of Luke's [Cipher Sword], standing out as a stark contrast to the original's white light.

“Infraction: unauthorized use of precursor magitechnology. The Company's Secretary role is required at minimum for non-auditor personnel,” it said in its monotone voice. There was a deeper sense of apprehension from the auditor as it took a step back.

Widening his stance, Luke kept the sword forward and leading.

I must have seen the gray expanse despite my disorientation, Luke thought. He was back in that place of black and white blocks covered in dishwasher light that prevented any shadows from being visible.

“Relinquish the weapon,” Auditor 317-B told him with all the vested authority he seemed to have by the System.

Luke felt like something punched him in the gut, sending him down to one knee. Auditor 317-B took advantage of Luke’s weakness and hurried forward to snatch the blade from his hand, but Luke was on his feet a moment later, thrusting the glowing blade of runes forward.

“The blade’s *mine* now,” Luke snarled defiantly. “I have the Marks to use it. Do you?”

The auditor tried to backpedal, but it was too late. Luke lunged. His darkened runic sword stabbed through the middle of Auditor 317-B.

Just like last time, the creature’s body vanished, leaving nothing but clothes. Luke quickly rifled through them but found nothing.

You have defeated [Auditor 317-B - Level ??]. Extra experience gained for incapacitating an enemy above your level. 20 Fate gained.

Level Up! Your [Thief] Class has reached Level 19.

Stat points earned: +4 Strength, +6 Dexterity, +2 Perception, +2 Vitality, +2 Free Points.

Luke didn’t waste any time dumping those free points into Arcane. He needed more Wisdom badly, but he needed the Arcane first. That stat should improve the potency of his magic skills.

Just one more point until 30 Arcane, he thought to himself as he searched for an exit.

He was getting better at resisting the auditor’s commands, but it was still unsettling how much power that creature had over him. If he was more decisive and didn’t bother to tell Luke he was breaking the Company’s rules in yet another way, the auditor could have taken the sword from his fingers the moment Luke fell to one knee.

As much as he loved getting heaps of Fate and experience, Luke wasn't stupid enough to linger longer than he absolutely had to.

A distant voice echoed with that powerful monotone that Luke associated with the auditor, **"Auditor 317-B requisitioning additional Precursor artillery."**

There was a distinct pause, as if somebody was scurrying around behind the scenes. Luke looked around but couldn't find the twist of light that had let him leave the last time.

He needed to get out of there, and fast. While it might be quite the find to take another Precursor item from the auditor, he didn't particularly want to clash a [Cipher Sword] against another.

A single cut might be the end of him, and there was no telling what other kind of effect that would result in.

Desperate, he triggered the effect of his [Umbral Ring] and sent out a pulse of shadow while turning in place.

His gambit paid off when he saw the ribbon of twisting light appear easily against the rolling black shadows that spread out in all directions.

"Requisition Approved, 317-B."

Luke watched as another red door opened. Auditor 317-B stepped through, holding out a single gloved hand as a familiar silvery implement appeared to drop out of the air into his palm.

The auditor wasted no time in summoning the white runes from one end. It walked toward Luke with purpose, just as he was stabbing frantically into the twist of light to open it.

Luke leapt through the half-formed portal just before the auditor was upon him, his sword slashing down a fraction of a second too slow to kill him.

The last thing Luke saw as he tumbled through the portal was the auditor's blank white head looking at him with an unmistakable sense of hatred.

Luke supposed he wouldn't have been much of a fan of somebody who had killed him twice.

In the distance, Luke could hear a voice speaking to the auditor. **“Auditor 317-B, you are exhibiting aberrant behavior in excess of established parameters. Report immediately to reprocessing and restructure for further evaluation.”**

Luke watched with horror as Auditor 317-B ignored the orders and climbed into the portal after Luke. Twisting around, Luke tried to will himself to go faster through the shimmering and spiraling portal between places.

The far end opened up and Luke surged through. He landed hard on his hip, but didn't have any time to worry about minor injuries.

Luke was already up on his feet, slashing violently with the sword of darkened runes. He destroyed the end of the portal moments before the auditor got to him.

A gloved hand reached out and was severed at the wrist as the portal shut with a *snap*.