

CHAPTER 41 – GREATER REWARDS

Glancing at the wall the Discordant Dragon had just passed through in his vision, Luke went and scooped up the miniature obelisk. It burned his skin with freezing cold, but Luke refused to let go.

“I. Was. Promised. Greater. Rewards,” he hissed through his clenched teeth.

The pain let up as if Luke won a bout. Something fell off the bottom of the crystalline thing as if it had been partially adhered to the bottom, released by his jostling.

He stared in surprise at what clattered to the altar.

“Yes, that’s much better,” Luke muttered to himself, slowly growing all too aware that perhaps he was long past stir-crazy.

The loop of metal was simple and unadorned. Transferring the cold obelisk to one of his sealed pockets, he picked up the ring and examined it.

It was infinitely light, unnaturally so. What he had thought at first was metal turned out to be shadow turned solid.

Item: [Umbral Ring (Epic)]

(Accessory)

A twisting shadow-forged band depicting a dragon biting its own tail as a symbol of infinity recognized across the multiverse. Steeped in the incredibly powerful Marks of the Discordant Dragon whose authority was once absolute in the third Epoch.

Enchantments: Creates sources of darkness and shadows.

Enchantments: Increases affinity to shadows, darkness and gravity.
Raises resistance against magical attacks. Instill with mana to soulbind.

Requirements: [Mark of the Shadow Lord]

Luke stared at the description. The ring was perfect.

The [Umbral Ring's] enchantments directly improved his powers over darkness and shadows.

So far, no other piece of equipment he came across was able to do that. He assumed spellbooks increased magic damage and capabilities for Mages. Much like a weapon does for a fighter like himself.

While he couldn't control gravity, the ring was still remarkably good. Perhaps good enough to be worth the effort. Luke wasn't sold just yet. The resistance to magical attacks would enhance his survivability and defenses, which made for a nice bonus.

Sliding the ring onto his middle finger, he flexed his hand into a fist. The skin-tight climbing gloves proved no restriction to the ring. He instilled mana into the ring to bind it to himself, and then realized there was another item he hadn't even tried that with.

Taking out the silver pen from his cloak, Luke trickled a stream of mana into it. He was getting a lot faster with the process of instilling mana.

There was a subtle resistance, forcing him to increase the trickle to a steady flow as it broke through and linked Luke to the strange runic sword.

He felt a kinship with the weapon that was unrivaled by anything else he had experienced so far. As if he had a piece of his own past back in his possession.

"I wonder what would have happened if I hadn't linked with you," he said to the pen, putting it away. "Would the auditor have been

able to take you back? This clearly isn't a wands-switching-owner sort of thing."

Eager to test his new piece of gear, Luke was particularly interested in what the enchantment did for creating sources of darkness and shadows precisely.

Focusing on the [Umbral Ring], Luke concentrated on a patch of pale shadow. The ring grew colder on his finger as the shadows deepened until they were darker than all the others.

It was like watching ink spread across paper. Wherever Luke's power touched, the shadows deepened supernaturally.

Grinning to himself, Luke cut off the flow of mana to the ring. It was decently expensive, which told him that once his Arcane was up to 30 he needed to start maxing out his Wisdom.

The more he learned of his shadow powers, the more he realized he was hurting himself without a decent pool of mana to rely on.

Luke gave the room one last sweep with his shadow senses. Finding nothing, he moved up to the blank stretch of wall that looked identical to every other inch of this plundered room.

His memory had always been good. Since coming to the multiverse, Luke's ability to spot and repeat patterns was now uncanny.

With little effort, he tapped the stones in the same order that he had seen the Discordant Dragon perform. There was a moment where Luke waited with bated breath before the stones rolled back to reveal a dingy passage covered over with cobwebs.

Stepping inside, Luke's ring pulsed. It reminded him of the dungeon key detecting a dungeon nearby.

In reply, torches bearing golden flames sprang forth. Their fires burned through the cobwebs in a scintillating display of gilded embers.

The cobwebs, Luke realized, were something more than just the leavings of – what he hoped were – long dead spiders.

There was something sinister that evaporated as the golden flames ate through them, opening up the passage and disarming whatever traps the Dragon had left for curious interlopers.

Fiddling with the ring on his finger, Luke took a deep breath and stepped up to the first set of stairs set back a dozen or so feet from the wall.

A grinding sound echoed behind him, but Luke didn't need to turn around to know that the way back was closed.

The only way out is through, Luke reminded himself.

Down the stairs and through a twisting claustrophobic passage, Luke finally found himself in a circular room bereft of anything but a central dais upon which a red-velvet pillow with golden tassels rested.

There were 13 separate passages. Each one was fronted by an arch, including the one he came through. At the peak of every arch pulsed a glowing rune.

After checking to make sure the Dragon didn't leave another goodie beneath the pillow, Luke sat down on it and crossed his legs into a meditative pose.

He wasn't sure what he was doing, but it seemed appropriate. There was no telling which path was the right one. He couldn't read the runes. They shared the strange incomprehensibility of the sword he now owned, as if they were somehow too complex for him to understand.

Though he had no idea how he knew, he was absolutely certain that the runes predated the System, somehow underpinning its workings at the same time.

Kind of like machine code, he thought. *People can't easily read it, but we can abstract concepts from it and create coding languages to*

interact with it... but in the end, every machine operates at pretty much the same level.

Taking a deep breath, Luke summoned an Echo. The shadowy creature was sent down the first passage. As soon as it passed below the arch, a faint barrier shimmered into being.

He tried to command the Echo to return, but it couldn't pass through the barrier. When Luke went up to it and placed his hand on the barrier, it tingled beneath his fingertips, but otherwise was as solid as steel.

So you have to commit, he thought, returning to the pillow.

Luke could feel faint impressions from the creature, but he couldn't see through it as much as he would have liked.

Though severely limiting the utility of his plan, Luke could still use the Echo to go down the path until—

Luke's attention suddenly snapped back as the tether recoiled. Something had destroyed the shadow clone. It wasn't even close to the distance limit.

He couldn't tell what had done the Echo in.

Maybe a monster or a trap. It was too sudden, and his control over the Echo wasn't that sophisticated. He likely needed higher Arcane or Wisdom, though that was just a guess.

Shifting his attention to the next passage, Luke sent another Echo out. He needed time to work this out, because he had the impression that there was only one way through. All the rest were traps, and if he stepped foot into the wrong one, he would be stuck.

There was a chance that with his heightened reflexes he might be able to survive whatever killed the first Echo—and now the second—but he didn't want to bank on them.

After enough attempts, the Echoes started saluting on their way into their assigned passages like they knew what was going to happen.

Luke didn't instruct the Echoes to do it. At least, he didn't do so consciously. His mind might be fraying a little at the edges, but he knew he would remember giving an order like that.

He needed sleep. Food. Water. All the things a growing boy could ask for. If he was going to start hearing voices, he hoped it would at least be Emma's warm and compassionate tones.

Still, the saluting was a little amusing, especially because the Echoes held the pose no matter if they were walking or running.

Using [Echo] was mana intensive, and Luke used his sole mana potion to recover what he could. After that, he had to take breaks to eat the rest of his spoiled and tainted meat.

Some of them were from the dire bats, others from the rats. All of which were days old by now.

The various afflictions—including good old [Botulism]—that he resisted helped to raise his flagging MP, along with his SP and HP. Most importantly, they filled him up, though he wasn't sure if he could keep the food down for long.

He desperately tried not to think of where the meat originated from.

He started longing for literally anything else. Sweetened soda, spicy noodles, savory cheese, classic flavored gum... He started to run out of ideas, never mind that gum wasn't the most edible of things.

He'd even take a fistful of those gross valentine's day candies.

The only benefit was that by the time he was down to the last two passages, Luke had eaten all the gross meat he was willing to stomach.

He didn't want to touch the [Acid-Brined Monster Meat] which somehow managed to stay intact and didn't melt his finger when he poked it.

Just knowing that it was almost all gone was a weight off his soul, despite the fact that *logically* they seemed better than proper meals. Though infinitely gross, they restored HP, SP, and MP reliably, depending on the afflictions he resisted.

Until I fail to resist one and get something like [Exploding Toenails] or some other horrible affliction.

“Two left,” Luke said as he sent the next Echo down the passage. This one lasted a full three minutes before it managed to die to whatever it was that killed them.

He hoped the passages weren't interconnected by secret doors that let whatever was killing the Echoes wander about to its heart's content.

If there was a monster, it never showed itself to Luke.

Turning to the last one, Luke sent another Echo down. Just like all but the 12th, the Echo was dissolved within a minute of passing out of visual range.

The barrier cut off his ability to perceive anything through his shadow senses. When the barrier vanished, Luke could never be certain of what had happened.

Luke turned back to the 12th passage. He leaned in close, careful not to pass through the arch entirely, and looked up. It was a long shot, one that he wasn't entirely sure would pan out.

But something from the initial quest stuck in his mind. He had looked for their “Marks in Shadow” but that had just been the runes the System wanted him to find.

However, runes predated the System.

So why would something that predates the System tell him to follow the System?

Something wasn't adding up.

When Luke looked up, the area on the opposite side of the arch was empty. Even to his shadow-enhanced senses, there was nothing there. He frowned and poked his head down another passage, making sure to keep the bulk of his body in the main chamber.

Each corridor was the same, no markings of any kind, no further runes... just nothing.

Twisting his ring of shadow back and forth as he thought about the problem, he realized he was missing something. The interior of the passage was in shadow, but what if it wasn't deep enough?

If this power comes from these precursors, then wouldn't it stand to reason that he needed to use their power to deepen the shadows in order to make whatever mark of theirs show up?

It would be like getting a letter written with invisible ink, only now he had a way of revealing the secret.

Or so he thought.

Luke repeated the process from the beginning. This time he used his [Umbral Ring] to conjure pitch-black shadows inside and around the passages to illuminate any hidden markings.

He had to wait a painfully long time for his MP to recover between multiple uses. The ring used mana exclusively.

It wasn't until he got to the 7th passage, not the 12th as he would have thought, that a rune appeared from within the depths of the darkened shadow.

Just to be sure, Luke continued his test on the remaining passages, but none of the others showed anything.

"I really thought the 12th passage would have been it," Luke thought. "Too obvious I guess?"

Another test? For somebody who had similar but not completely identical powers?

Luke shook his head and stepped into the passage. The barrier sprang up behind him, blocking him from returning.

Just to be sure, he tried to break through, but it was futile. He had made his choice, now he had to follow through.