

CHAPTER 43 – WITNESS

Luke collapsed back onto the stone floor, heart hammering in his chest, the [Cipher Sword] gripped tight in his fist.

A glance at his vital resources told him that the unsettling enervation that stole over him was not just in his head.

He rolled over and twisted the pen's base. The runes winked out one by one. As they vanished, the drain on his body eased up significantly until it stopped altogether.

“So using this thing drains *all* of my vital resources,” Luke said thoughtfully. “Not sure I like that.”

It wasn't a massive amount, but he had lost an equivalent amount of HP, MP, and SP. However, when he *used* the sword, the drain suddenly skyrocketed.

How did I miss that before?

Resolving to only use the sword when it was absolutely necessary—like fighting off an auditor—Luke got up to his feet and took stock.

Aside from the drain on his life, he was otherwise fine. Better than fine, he was a single level away from another Thief skill, which he was greatly looking forward to.

If [Feint] turned into [Echo], maybe Thief had another skill that would be compatible with his bloodline.

Though, if it meant that he had to face down a rogue Auditor 317-B to do so, he wasn't sure it was worth it.

From what he could gather about levels being shown, it was a *very* bad sign that he couldn't see the auditor's level.

For now, he had escaped again, but he wasn't sure if he could do it a third time. He had the distinct impression that the auditor wasn't supposed to pursue him.

The fact that he did suggested something unsettling, a rogue agent that had a vendetta against him. Something Luke very much would have preferred to avoid, but it wasn't as if he was willing to lie down and die.

What choice did he have?

Taking in his surroundings, Luke noticed he was standing on the ruins of a great castle. A second look told him that his first assessment was wrong.

This wasn't the ruins of a castle, but one that was being constructed. There were no cranes or machines of any kind. Instead, people lifted blocks of black stone larger than houses into place with great ease.

It took him a few moments walking around various workers who would have put Superman to shame, to realize that this was the same castle as the last vision of the Dragon. The only difference was that this one wasn't besieged.

There was a sense of purpose and work being done all around, with a distinct lack of concern or fear. There was no pending battle here, and Luke could see designs for gardens and apartments being set up all over.

The sky darkened and Luke looked up in time to see the Discordant Dragon swoop down from the sky in his massive dragon form. As he descended, he shrank. He landed in dark boots and opulent, colorful clothing, looking decidedly more human.

Tugging on his robes, he motioned to the side where a red and gold robed disciple was waiting. The young disciple was a rather handsome man that Luke realized was one of the men from the previous vision, only significantly younger.

“Thank you for elevating me, Lord Dragon,” the man stammered over himself.

He looked new to the robes. The disciple’s pompously tall and ornate hat seemed to want to fly off in the gale-force winds whipping around the highlands.

“You earned it, Luca,” the Dragon said. There was something slightly feral about him. A smattering of scales—almost like freckles—adorned his cheekbones. “How are the kids?”

“Doing well, Lord Dragon, very well now that we have a home to call our own. We owe you everything, our very lives.”

The Dragon looked slightly abashed as he waved away the praise. “Our *Order* has done this. Always remember that Luca. I may not always be here to shepherd you. You must be able to stand on your own.”

Luca looked stricken, as if he had just been told Santa wasn’t real. “S-surely you jest! You are the Discordant Dragon. What reason would you have to leave? This is your home too, is it not?”

“It is,” the Dragon said. Was it Luke’s imagination or was there a deep sadness in his eyes for a moment? When he turned to Luca again, he was all smiles. “We will civilize this world,” he promised Luca. “For Mith’la.”

Luca suddenly went very still, his shoulders hunched. Then he forced them back with an impressive burst of will, straightening as if he intended to give the Discordant Dragon a shoulder to lean on despite his mortal form. “For Mith’la,” he intoned. “We will make this world a palace in her memory.”

A flicker of a smile, there and gone again, then the Dragon swept away with Luca hurrying in his wake. “Tell me how the building proceeds. I have kept this place hidden, but it becomes harder every day. The others continue their search.”

“Our wards are in place, Lord Dragon,” Luca said confidently. “Let them come and we will crush them whether the grand palace is completed or not. The Order of the Discordant Dragon will not be swept aside so easily!”

“Easy there Luca,” the Dragon told him. “You have a family now. A little less fire and brimstone and a bit more stability and forward thinking, yes?”

“As you say, Lord Dragon.”

The Discordant Dragon changed the subject to their readiness and how many of their Order have been relocated to the shelters.

From what Luke could gather, they were hunkering down for something apocalyptic to happen, readying themselves to emerge from the destruction into a new world where they would be poised to rebuild and reclaim something that was taken from them.

Though they never spoke of this “Mith’la” again, Luke’s next vision confirmed his darkest suspicions.

The world drained of color and showed him another scene. This one with a much younger Dragon accompanied by a woman of incomparable beauty but with the same dragon eyes and smattering of scales on her upper cheeks.

If the last viewing of the Dragon had a sense of feral power to him, this one was overflowing with erratic energy. The pair moved swiftly, practically dancing through the battlefield of smoke and ash as they smote horrid creatures that dared to rise up against them.

One moment they were wielding elegant swords, the next they were launching into the sky on wings of black and gold, breathing scorching dragon’s breath onto their adversaries.

Destruction was all they left in their wake. There were a few other people that Luke could see, but they hung far back as the pair danced death among their enemies.

As they alighted onto a bubbling outcropping of stone, the Dragon smiled at the gorgeous woman with hair like spun gold and gently curved horns peeking out from her hair. “Stay,” the Dragon said.

“But they are on the run!” she said, a light dancing in her silver eyes. “We could deal a crushing defeat in one motion, establishing our Order and running off the rabble that would hunt us into oblivion!”

The Dragon suddenly didn’t look so jovial and full of energy. He shook his head, taking her hands in his. “They are on the run, Mith’la. That is enough for now. Let us gather our forces and establish an Order here.”

She motioned toward the distant fires and fleeing soldiers. “If we let them go, we tell the other dragon hunters that we’re fine with them poaching us so long as they run away when they are done! I will not raise our child in such a place.”

They both looked toward the small bulge, barely perceptible through her elaborate scale armor.

“That is why I want you to stop,” the Dragon told her. “An enemy backed into a corner is a far more dangerous thing. Let them flee. We will give chase when it suits us, not them.”

In answer, the woman broke away and leapt into the sky, transforming into a golden dragon halfway through the motion and soaring into the sky.

The Dragon cursed and jumped after her, turning into a black streak of starry night as the image faded around Luke once more.

A barrage of images assaulted him. The Dragon was now a young man. He was one of several other young dragon-like people who let loose their rage and power on enemies that would hunt them into extinction.

Establishing their Order that rose to great prominence with Mith’la and the Discordant Dragon at the helm. Luke was in awe of their

dragon powers, but even that paled in comparison to the odd, dark gravity powers that the Discordant Dragon wielded.

He crushed entire cities flat for a word of displeasure against him and those he cared for. Luke had heard of the power of gods from mythological stories, but he had never *seen* it in action.

Witnessing these events was worth uplifting into the multiverse all on their own.

Despite his beliefs, he found himself believing in the powers of a god. They were truly terrifying. How could anybody stand up to somebody who could crush a skyscraper of pale stone and shimmering glass with a wave of their hand?

And more importantly, Luke wanted to know how *he* could get access to that power.

Luke wanted to be just as strong as the Discordant Dragon. Stronger. Could such a thing be possible through leveling alone? Perhaps his bloodline was the way?

This precursor blood seemed to be the connection between him and the Dragon.

He found himself wanting something more. Despite his feelings recoiling from all the pain and hurt of trying so many times and still failing, he yearned to have a partner like the Dragon's Mith'la.

Time unraveled before him, showing the Discordant Dragon's rise to power and prestige. Younger, weaker, but full of fire, he took on all challengers. Wielding shadow fire with his gravity magic, he brought low all contenders for the throne until he was the only one left.

At a time before he found other dragons, the only person by his side was the golden-haired beauty who seemed more than happy to dance in his shadow.

Throughout the ages, they ruled side-by-side like the gods they were. Time unwound further until the Dragon and Mith'la seemed

to be the same age as Luke. Not just in looks, but in mannerisms and temperament.

They no longer had that ageless look in their eyes. Everything was bright and new to them.

Luke couldn't imagine being with one person for that long. How many eons passed while he watched the whirlwind romance play out? Too many to count.

Then he found himself wondering what his thoughts had shied away from this entire time.

What right did Luke have to be privy to the Discordant Dragon's life? Was that truly why the auditor was after him?

It did seem like a violation.

He knew he wouldn't want anybody able to see his life, all his highs and lows, every hidden pain on display. At the same time, Luke doubted he could make a mark on history like the Discordant Dragon evidently had, even if he wanted to.

The darkness that wrapped around Luke like a shroud fell away until he stood deep in the heart of a mountain. He could feel the pressure of millions of tons of stone bearing down on him.

For the first time in a long time, the Discordant Dragon was alone. He stood at the center of the circular room, which seemed to be a theme with the Dragon.

At the center of the room was a simple well made of pitted black stone.

He was young, even younger than Luke, it seemed.

The Dragon looked... weak. That was the only way to describe it. He walked furtively on bare feet, dressed little better than Luke currently was as he inched his way fearfully toward the well.

Luke stepped up to the well's edge and peered in, surprised to see the Dragon doing the same thing and just as hesitantly. As they

both leaned over the edge, the roiling darkness within fountained up like a geyser, turning everything black.

An inexorable, undeniable primordial force called out to Luke from within the well's endless depths.