

## CHAPTER 37 – SWORD OF RUNES

Something primal snapped within Luke.

Shadows erupted out of his body, writhing across the floors and walls like a two-dimensional ink tornado. The color of the world inverted, then the shadows rushed back onto his body in a swarm.

Shadows coiled around his limbs and wrenched on his arms like a puppeteer's strings. Control flooded back into Luke's body.

His muscles, suddenly alive again, snapped into action. Shadows and body working together as one, Luke twisted his wrists painfully to bring the blades up and out like a crossed X.

There was a flash of silver and then a sucking silence that made Luke blink in surprise at finding himself alive.

The auditor seemed just as confused. He stood there, arm pointed toward Luke, clearly unsure why Luke was still standing.

Luke looked at the edges of his blades. They were dripping a silver liquid that he realized was the creature's blood.

The creature pulled back its stump of an arm to inspect it curiously.

Down on the floor between them, the auditor's hand still gripped the strange pen-like sword of runes.

Luke sheathed one sword, snatched up the hand still holding the blade, and slashed.

There was nothing. Not even the faintest tug that would suggest he had cut through something.

The auditor's clothes fell to the ground, empty.

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 18.

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

Level Up! Your [Human (G-Grade)] Race has reached Level 9.

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

Luke stared in awe at the defeat notification. That was a *massive* amount of Fate. Not to mention the experience that flowed into him. It had to be staggeringly high if he was able to level up again so soon.

It didn't escape Luke's notice that the defeat System prompt was slightly different from normal. He didn't truly kill the auditor, just incapacitated it.

That meant it could come back for round two.

"Best not stick around," he said as the auditor's hand faded away. He was left gripping the severed scrap of cuff and the strange sword.

Shaking free the cloth, Luke sheathed his longsword, but kept the strange pen held in one hand. He headed out into the open expanse of white blocks that littered the odd out-of-bounds space.

Luke trembled with a heady admixture of fear and excitement. Gripping the strange blade of runes tightly in his hand, he slowly circled to make sure the auditor wasn't going to get the drop on him.

A doorway appeared, much like the one the Discordant Dragon had walked through, but this one was mundane and simple. The red painted door opened outward to reveal a beige hallway beyond.

The auditor stepped through, shutting the door behind itself.

Luke wasn't sure how he knew, but he was bone-certain that it was the same one. "You must heal fast," Luke told him, backing away and casting around for any exits.

**"You will stop,"** the auditor commanded, dispassionate as ever.

Luke found it easier to resist this time. Once the dam was broken, his will couldn't be constrained again. It took him less than a couple of heartbeats to free himself from the auditor's grasp.

As soon as Luke started looking for an exit, the blade in his hand began to pulse. It reminded him of the dungeon key.

Using it like a dowsing rod, Luke pointed and allowed it to lead the way. Thankfully, it dragged him in a direction opposite the auditor, who walked with a sense of purpose toward Luke.

*I could speed walk faster than him,* Luke thought, but didn't dare say aloud in case he gave the creature ideas.

Once Luke arrived at the spot the pen sword led him to, he saw something there floating in mid-air. It was impossible to see until he was so close he could touch it. Now that he was right near it, he could see a thin coruscating ribbon of light twisting back and forth.

It was oddly similar to the sword of runes.

Unsure of what he was doing, Luke raised the sword of scripted light and stabbed into the anomaly.

Like a key in a lock, the twisting light sprang open to reveal a portal to some other place. Luke glanced inside just long enough to make sure that he wasn't jumping to his death before he dove through.

The light snapped shut behind him, leaving him alone in a dimly lit castle of some sort. Tapestries hung along the walls, depicting

various scenes of conquest and destruction. They all featured a dragon with scales like a stargazer's fantasy, replete with twinkling stars and swirling galaxies.

Fortunately, it seemed Luke had left the auditor behind. For now.

Luke took a moment to orient himself and take in this new place. The air smelled faintly wet, as if it had just rained. Gone was the otherworldly sense that he was somewhere *other*.

He was only just now realizing how sterile the air there smelled and tasted, as if it was manufactured.

Taking another deep breath full of fresh air, Luke examined the item in his hand. He found the small dial at the base that the auditor used. Luke watched with a sense of relief as the runes winked out one by one until they vanished, leaving just an ordinary silver pen in his hand.

**Item: [Cipher Sword (Mythical)]**

**(Artifact)**

*A remnant piece of Precursor magitech, repurposed by the Company for security operations. The limits of this artifact are unknown. Functions as a pure magic weapon and crafting tool.*

**Enchantments:** Transforms between weapon, crafting tool and mundane state. When durability reaches zero, this artifact shatters and reconstitutes itself over time. Instill with mana to soulbind.

**Requirements:** Precursor Marks.

Luke stared at the pen in shock. The thing was *mythical-rarity*. The highest he had ever seen, let alone possessed. Recognized as an artifact, the [Cipher Sword] was something far more than a mere weapon.

*I bet this blade is more valuable than everything else I own combined, Luke thought with awe. [Golden Ginger Pill] included.*

The blade was practically indestructible too as well. If the [Cipher Sword] broke, it would just return to him after a period of time.

He remembered his bloodline mentioning “precursor” as well. Whatever this sword truly was, it appeared to be connected to his [Mark of the Shadow Lord]. If only in some tenuous way.

No matter what, he wasn't going to let it go. It had saved him, and he would need its blade in the future to guard against that auditor.

“I don't care what the others say,” the Discordant Dragon was saying as Luke entered the room. “I'm not going to keep doing this. We're giving them what they want every time we engage. End it.”

He was trailed by no less than a dozen opulently robed individuals. The Discordant Dragon looked a little younger, but no less weary. He wore a close-cut robe that echoed the style of the suit Luke had last seen him in.

Jewelry adorned his fingers, throat, and the cuffs of his robes, but otherwise he chose the same somber scheme of black and white.

“My Lord Dragon,” an elderly man said, who radiated an obscene amount of power even while bowing deeply, “this is most abnormal. If we do not engage, then we will not grow.”

The Discordant Dragon growled, the sound rolling out and crushing everything in the room, including its people, to the ground. Tables and chairs, enough to seat a hundred or more, were smashed into the ground as if somebody had just turned up gravity a thousandfold.

The Discordant Dragon's... disciples? Followers? Luke didn't know what they were. They struggled to their knees as if in prostration.

“I did not mean to offend, o' Lord Dragon!”

“Then do as you are told. You are my vassal, are you not, Renlor?” the Discordant Dragon asked, his voice as cold as the darkest depths of space.

“Of course, my soul is yours to command!”

“Then do as you are told and leave me be.” This was said so quietly that Luke was surprised he could hear him, halfway across the feasting hall as he was.

The opulently dressed disciples fled as quickly as decorum would allow, leaving the Discordant Dragon alone.

The Dragon paced along the room, ignoring the destruction as if it were of no concern to him. Hands folded behind his back, he stepped onto the powderized remains of tables and chairs. He walked right past Luke as if he didn't exist.

“I probably don't,” he said aloud. Up close, he could tell that the Discordant Dragon was *definitely* younger than the last time he saw him.

Somehow, Luke was going further into the Dragon's past.

“How do gods age?” Luke asked himself, following alongside the Dragon. “You're basically immortal, right? So, are you willingly changing, or is something else going on?”

The Discordant Dragon did not answer, confirming Luke's suspicions about what this was. Either some sort of memory or a very weird version of A Christmas Carol.

Luke shook his head as he fell into step beside the Dragon. “Nah, can't be about me. I don't look anything like you. I'm pretty sure my mom and dad have forgotten which kid was theirs a few times when they picked me up from school and everybody was wearing the same clothes. Nobody would forget *you*.”

Outside, the walls of the castle shook violently, but the stones stood strong. Luke could see the way the Dragon winced with each rumble as if he was being hit instead of the building surrounding them.

They walked for a while in silence, the Discordant Dragon deep in thought. Luke found himself fiddling with the [Cipher Sword],

turning it on and off and resisting the urge to make lightsaber sounds.

Luke had visited castles before. He even took a field trip to one in Scotland once, but this thing was larger than a skyscraper. He could see other parts of it from the open windows, and those were absolutely mind-bogglingly large as well.

You could have put an entire city inside the castle and still have enough room to never see anybody while going about your business.

Most people would say the Dragon looked troubled, but Luke thought he looked ready to boil over. Rage didn't even begin to explain it.

While Luke followed him, he set his free points while trying not to gawk at his current Fate of 67.

Since his latest skill benefitted from Arcane, he figured he would boost it up, so it wasn't so pitiful anymore. The 3 free points brought it up to a total of 27. Another 3 and he'd focus on something else.

While he didn't look forward to the auditor finding him, maybe he could incapacitate him again and net some more experience and Fate.

The Dragon led them out onto the battlements where the largest war Luke had ever seen was currently ongoing. His eyes burned at all the flashing lights as magic whizzed back and forth, turning the air into a violently brilliant display.

Magic bolts rained down from both sides of the churned-up battlefield. There were dead on both sides, but they seemed to have deadlocked into a cycle of death and destruction without either gaining ground.

Luke recalled the horrible World War I documentaries about how thousands of men would die for a few feet that would inevitably be erased a day or two later.

Clenching his fists, the Discordant Dragon raised a single hand. Black wings unfurled from his back like cracks through reality showing a starry night sky beyond. He flexed his wings once and then *flapped* a single wing.

A ripple of power rolled across the field. Great glittering creatures of light that fountained sprays of golden fire onto the Dragon's own troops were crushed into sparkling motes as the power surged over them.

The Dragon flapped his other wing as a redshifted light flowed out over the battlefield. As the second wave of energy caught up to the first, the few creatures that weren't crushed in the initial wave were torn apart into millions of scintillating threads, as if something was ripping their very atomic bonds.

Silence reigned.

The Discordant Dragon looked a decade older. "Even when I don't want to engage, they force my hand," he whispered to himself. "It never ends."

He turned and walked back toward the interior of the castle.

Luke turned to the carnage, shocked at the raw display of power. How many creatures did the Discordant Dragon just kill? Creatures who were so strong they could shoot beams of energy out of their hands and fly around as if it was second nature?

His mind reached the millions, and he still felt certain he was thinking too small.

Shivering, Luke turned away and caught up with the Dragon.