

CHAPTER 73 – THE DISCORDANT DRAGON

Luke stepped through the swirling vortex of darkness and into the Discordant Dragon's domain.

Any hope of sauntering, head held high, into the Dragon's home at the heart of a supermassive black hole was stymied by the fact that the world shifted and rolled nearly 90 degrees toward the sky.

Luke appeared to be coming out of the well, his hands flapped uselessly at the stone sides and he only managed to pull himself up by sheer luck because the damned vortex was trying to pull him under again.

Rolling over the lip of the well, Luke flopped to the ground, breathing heavily, staring at the amused expression of the Discordant Dragon.

"You survived." It sounded more like a question or an exclamation of disbelief.

Yindferl's onyx figurine grew uncomfortably hot within his cloak's pocket.

"I did more than just survive," Luke said, full of genuine pride at his accomplishments. He didn't just complete a challenge quest, but freed a good man from certain death and put the spirit of a Master Runegraver to rest.

What he was proud of, more than anything, was earning Yind's trust.

The Dragon's eyes flickered to the pocket where Yindferl's figurine was safely tucked away. "I see."

Then, in a move that seemed to surprise even the Discordant Dragon, the godthing reached down and held out a hand to help him to his feet.

Once upright, the Dragon swept nonexistent dust from Luke's back and shoulders. "I would have liked to spend a little more time, but I'm afraid we'll need to cut this short. You are expected elsewhere."

Luke raised an eyebrow at that. "Didn't you mention—"

The Dragon raised a hand to stop him. "Your bloodline is incomplete, yes. You proved both to me and the Precursor—" Here he nodded at the ancient well that was beginning to splash and froth darkly. "—that you were more than up to the task. You know, you didn't have to *solve* the bloody thing. You just had to survive the Gordian's collapse. There were far easier ways to accomplish that."

Luke gave the Dragon a lopsided grin. "I figured fixing it would be the best way to survive."

"It certainly is *a* way to survive," the Dragon said, looking minutely proud. "But enough of that. You survived, so take your prize and be on your merry way."

Luke turned to the indicated well. He could feel a power brewing within, calling out to him. "What about you?" he said, turning back to the Dragon.

"I'll remain here, watching."

Somehow, that didn't feel right. A burning ember of resentment and anger flashed to wakefulness in his middle. He knew he should keep his head down, get more power, and be gone.

Clearly, the Discordant Dragon wanted to be left alone.

He had walked out on all those other gods over some problem. He didn't think Luke would survive, which was the only reason he was following through with this in the first place.

“No,” Luke said, turning to face down the Dragon.

The Dragon’s golden slitted eyes widened. “No?” he said softly, dangerously. “Who are you to tell me what I can or cannot do?”

Luke jabbed a finger at the god. “You don’t *get to hide*,” he snarled at him. “You’re a god!” He gestured to include the ridiculousness of this place. “Look at what you’ve made, and you’re just sitting on it like some hoarder.”

“Now don’t you—” the Dragon began, but Luke steamrolled right over him. His anger building to a fever-pitch.

“No. I’m *sick of it*. Do you know what I just went through? Were you even *watching*? You’re a *god*! Act like it. It’s not a part-time job. You can’t just *turn it off* and walk out the damn door. You have people faithful to you, don’t you? Worshippers? Do you have *any* clue what they must be going through with their prayers unanswered and your lengthy silence?”

“You don’t know what I’ve—”

“I do!” Luke shouted at him. “I saw it all. Every heartbreak. The Company offered you a deal you couldn’t refuse after what happened to your wife. I know how tired you were. I *was there*.”

The Company and the Discordant Dragon were interconnected. He was the Thirteenth board member. That was what he saw in the very first vision. The Discordant Dragon talking with the other gods of the Company.

“But that’s the thing about being a god,” Luke continued. “It’s like being a parent, but on a larger scale. You can’t just quit because it’s hard. Tough shit! It’s going to be hard. That’s just life. Whether you’re a god or a single mom struggling to make ends meet, you *do not pick up stakes and disappear*.” Luke was nearly panting. He could hardly remember being so angry.

The look in the Dragon’s eyes was a clear warning sign of danger. Luke was beyond caring. He did, however, choose his words more

carefully. As much as he wanted to swear himself blue, that wouldn't help anything.

“You have people counting on you,” Luke told him. “People who *need* you. And what are you doing? Feeling sorry for yourself? Tired because people never stop with the endless cycle of fighting and misery? Too bad. Welcome to the party. Nobody gets it easy.”

Rather than appear furious, the Discordant Dragon bore an expression of great surprise, which then changed into somber introspection. “I should smite you where you stand for your insolence,” he said softly. “I've destroyed entire worlds for less.”

Luke spread his arms wide. “Then do it and prove me right.”

Yindferl's figurine burned worse than ever.

Before Luke knew what was happening, the drake appeared in a flash of purple smoke, snarling, and standing between himself and the Discordant Dragon.

As powerful as Yind was, she did not compare to a god.

The Discordant Dragon's ire at being challenged by a mortal drained away as he looked at Yindferl. They exchanged a brief, if tense, series of notes in High Draconic.

Thanks to his [Mother of All Tongues], Luke managed to understand pieces here and there, but it was impossible to get the full scope of what they were saying. High Draconic was ancient, unlike typical languages, it distilled knowledge into sound.

It was utterly unique, beautiful, and terrifying all at once.

Every intonation had an impossible number of meanings. You could encapsulate the whole of Wikipedia in a single word of High Draconic. It was only through his race skill that Luke could grasp anything, and even then, it was the barest fraction.

The Discordant Dragon relaxed and pulled on the edges of his robes, looking like he had just swallowed a lemon unexpectedly.

Yindferl went from tense and fearsome protector to relaxed and paw-licking in a fraction of a second. One moment she was ready to rip the Discordant Dragon's throat out, the next she was sitting on her haunches licking a shovel-sized paw like an overgrown panther.

"What just happened?" Luke asked, bewildered and a little suspicious. For a moment there he felt the hangman's noose tighten around his neck, and then it was gone.

The Discordant Dragon looked at him as if for the first time, realizing he was still there. "Oh. Luke." He gave a sheepish, fanged grin and rubbed the back of his head. "I... suppose you could say I've been reminded of my roots. I was not kidding when I said I've killed entire populations for less insolence... but in this instance you were right. I apologize."

Luke stood there, poleaxed. A god had just *apologized to him*.

"Don't look so surprised!" the Dragon chided. "I am a big enough god to know when I am being a bit..."

"Sulky?" Luke offered with an insolent grin.

Yind snorted twin curls of smoke in amusement.

There was a flash of anger, and then it died away just as fast as it came. The Discordant Dragon straightened his clothes and strove to look imperious and haughty. "I was going to say, pondering life's many workings, but... sure. Sulky. You're pushing your luck. You know that, don't you?" He shook his head, seeing Luke's grin. "Of course you do."

"I wouldn't know what to do with my luck if I didn't push it," Luke retorted. "What are you going to do?"

The Dragon shrugged and hunched his shoulders. He looked like the teenage boy Luke had last seen. The one who stood before the well that granted its Precursor bloodline. "Go back to the Board, for starters. I have a sect that needs tending, as you have so *kindly*

pointed out. It has been a very long time since I've seen them face-to-face. I feel they're due for some quality time."

"The Board at the Company?" Luke asked, wondering if he had been correct at the Discordant Dragon's affiliation.

"The one and only." He looked at Luke, weighing him. "Tangling with an Auditor is going to cause some hefty migraines. But I think I can run interference for you. For a time. Eventually, you'll need to answer for your transgressions. Still got the cipher?"

Luke patted the pocket where it was located. He didn't think it was a good idea to lie right then.

"Good. Keep it. You're going to need it."

Luke narrowed his eyes. "What's that supposed to mean?"

The Dragon winked and put a finger alongside his sharp nose.

"You've got an audience with *royalty*. Always a good idea to save your best outfits for such important shindigs, I always say."

Luke opened his mouth but caught the mood of the Dragon and realized he wasn't going to elaborate further.

"What now?" Luke asked, gesturing toward the well.

"Now, we do things a little differently," the Dragon told him. He opened his mouth, then stopped and shook his head. "No. I will give you a choice. Humans like choices, right? Good. You can deepen your bloodline powers with the well, as is your right. Be your own man, yada yada. Or you can accept a Boon from me."

The Dragon wasn't saying he was *sorry* in so many words, but Luke took this as the olive branch it was. A sort of *sorry for nearly burning your soul until your atoms dissolved*, type of apology.

Yind looked between the unfathomable darkness of the well, and then at the Dragon before her attention finally fell on Luke.

"What does your Boon have to do with my bloodline?" Luke asked, reaching out to pet Yind's sleek flank.

The Dragon looked discomfited for a moment as he glanced at the well. “When I first acquired my powers, I did so in the opposite way as you. My shadow powers took longer to bring to the fore. The gravity powers were first. I am offering you the same path, should you wish to accept it. You may, of course, take up the well and do as you would, but with my Boon you will skip the grueling—and just between us, tedious—bone-breaking fun of learning how to manipulate gravity with your shadows.”

Luke slowly grinned. “A shortcut to gravity powers, huh?”

“More like a bridge over an impossibly deep chasm,” the Dragon said. “One you would eventually pass after falling to the lightless depths.”

Luke had the impression that this was not a normal offer, and that it went beyond a simple apology. He would be taking something from the Dragon if he did this, that much he was sure about.

“Would I become your disciple?” Luke asked, looking for an elaboration on a decision that was turning out to be of grand importance. This would shape his bloodline, one of his core and central fonts of power.

“No. There are no strings attached.” He chuckled. “In fact, you might actually have more targets on your back if we do this. There is no end to the number of disciples that want my powers and have slaved away to appease me and my temples. To see you with them, without adhering to the tenets or otherwise bound by our strictures, might well just set a few of them into an apopleptic fit.”

Luke smirked. “Sounds like fun.”