

CHAPTER 36 – PRECURSOR LEGACY

Luke crawled forward through a cramped, narrow passage on his hands and knees. He wasn't crazy about confined spaces, so he hurried to the extent that his high Dexterity could carry him. [Fleet of Foot] would likely get him through even faster, but he wanted to conserve his energy for any fighting.

Luke was entirely on his own, once again.

He could hear the faint sound of water sloshing up ahead.

Entering F-Grade Dungeon...

(Challenge Variant)

Warning, you are venturing beyond the Company's Wave 1 assessment test perimeter. Corruption of your Marks may occur if you do not turn back.

You will gain no LP beyond this point.

The Auditors have been notified.

Return to the assessment area immediately.

Luke grinned to himself despite the dire warning.

He operated on the gray-hat logic that the more people didn't want you poking around somewhere, the more you *should* poke around.

There was no telling what he would find.

That System prompt was a fancy way of telling him that he was proceeding into a high risk, high reward Dungeon. Perhaps an area that wasn't merely a Dungeon and was far more than it seemed.

Ominous though it was, Luke wasn't about to pass up the chance to poke his nose behind the painted scenery when everybody else was running around dealing with this new world.

Let's see what you're so concerned about hiding, Luke thought as he pressed on. *I'm all for finding some secrets.*

One moment he was crawling forward in utter nothingness and the next he saw a strange room above him. His vision shifted abruptly to the floor as gravity flipped and he fell hard onto the hard polished stone floor.

Voices echoed all around him with so much power that he felt like his bones were about to crumble from their presence.

Luke was on his feet in a moment, surrounded by several people in odd clothes. Some were in suits that would have fit in at any high-powered Fortune 500 company's boardroom, while others looked like they just came from Hogwarts.

Togas were in attendance by a few, and others wore more funereal attire, but none of them looked as if they were out of place. Somehow, the whole world revolved around each of these people milling about the large, oddly modern room.

Luke stood in the center of the room. Hemming him in on all sides was a desk that made an unbroken circle of golden wood shot through with black streaks of night sky, as if he was staring through a crack in reality.

There was an oppressive force in the room, like the air before a storm. As much as Luke was getting used to being in horrible situations, he somehow felt that this was altogether something worse. To even *think* about touching the swords at his hips would be to court death itself.

So he straightened up, dusted what filth he could from his clothes, and took in the shadowy figures of the dimly lit room.

Aside from the eclectic attire that somehow fit despite how disjointed it was, Luke realized he couldn't see anybody's face.

There was something that hurt his eyes whenever he tried. When he forced himself to endure the pain, where a head should have been was just a smearing of impressions.

He felt that he saw a thousand faces in a fraction of a second, all moving and talking at once until there was nothing there but a blurred smear.

There was one face that he could see, though.

Luke had to do a double-take because he *swore* for a second that it was Keanu Reeves. The guy had black hair parted into curtains. The back tied into a slight tail, and a dark, slightly patchy beard. The uncanny likeness stopped there.

His eyes were golden lights with vertical slits like a lizard's.

That would have certainly explained the actor's ageless immortality, Luke thought wryly.

His voice wasn't quite a dead ringer, but it was surprisingly close. He spoke softly, yet his voice carried. Luke found himself straining, like many in the room, to hear the man properly.

Instead of the opulent strange clothes, he wore a crisp black suit, black tie, and a white shirt beneath.

The only splash of color on him at all was a pair of silver cufflinks that glowed and pulsed with purple light coming from a delicately inscribed rune.

"Gentlegods and goddesses of the Board," not-Keanu said. "we're making a big mistake here." He paused, though Luke couldn't see why.

A moment later, he understood.

The room exploded. Both literally and figuratively. The walls buckled and bowed out as explosive power rippled out from every

person there. Luke counted 13 total, including the only man–god?– whose face he could see.

Apparently, when gods and goddesses argued, more than mere words were exchanged. It was a wonder how Luke was even alive.

When the dazzling display of power was over, the room remade itself as if nothing had ever happened. Thunder rumbled as the gods spoke amongst each other in heated voices that could have forged iron.

Luke had the distinct impression that he wasn't truly here. Nobody paid him the least amount of attention, and he was fairly certain that he would have been destroyed down to the atom if he had been.

He tried to shout over the din, but even when the room eventually quietened, nobody looked at him.

Then he did the unthinkable and drew his swords.

Still nothing.

“So... I'm not here, but I'm seeing it?” he said aloud, thoughtfully. “Like a flashback or something.”

Luke looked around at the gods as they grumbled and argued about something he had missed over the earlier deafening sounds.

Not-Keanu looked haggard and tired. Luke could sympathize. He looked like Luke felt whenever he had to attend meetings that could have easily been done over email.

Whatever it was that Not-Keanu had said, it was very clearly not well-received. The arguing continued at a less reality-breaking level, but Not-Keanu looked like somebody had just kicked his puppy.

Once again, Luke struggled not to see the similarity.

There was a ceaseless disappointment and weariness in his golden eyes. They dimmed as Luke watched, and he felt a stab of empathy for him.

“You have cast your lot, and so I leave you to it.” Not-Keanu proclaimed warily. “I have no fight left to give.”

A doorway opened, a vertical slit of darkness that rotated outward and formed a rectangular slice of nothingness. Not-Keanu pushed himself up from his chair and strode toward it while the others around him argued.

Only once the door began to close did the other gods and goddesses notice the thirteenth member’s absence.

A thick-set man with broad shoulders that nearly bulged out of his three-piece suit said, “Where does the Discordant Dragon think he is going?”

“The Board *must* come to a decision,” a goddess demanded heatedly. “With or without the Thirteenth. The Company must have *order*.” Her Greek chiton reminded Luke of the Company woman who introduced him to the multiverse.

More arguing and bickering ensued.

As much as Luke enjoyed his Greek mythology unit in school, he wasn’t interested in gods that whined and complained. He sprinted forward, leapt over the wide desk, and bolted after the rapidly shrinking doorway.

As soon as Luke dove through, he realized how potentially idiotic what he just did was.

It could have led anywhere, including the deep vacuum of space. Instead, he found himself in a painfully bright gray-white area. All around him were shifting cubes of white, gray, or black speckled with stars and gaseous nebulae.

“Hello?” Luke called.

He couldn’t see the Discordant Dragon anywhere, which was a lot better name to call him in his head than “Not-Keanu” despite how accurate it was.

“I guess the eye slits are kinda like a dragon,” Luke admitted.

“Report.”

Luke immediately dropped behind a black cube the size of a minivan as he heard the oddly powerful voice echoing across the gray expanse.

Instinctively, Luke wrapped shadows around himself, building up layer by layer in an interwoven cloaking web that was more complicated than he had ever been capable of before.

Looking around, he saw a mannequin in a suit much like the Discordant Dragon’s. The face was a perfectly smooth oval and the creature that occupied the suit was easily 8 feet tall and thin as a rail with white-gloved hands.

Unlike the Discordant Dragon’s Italian cut suit, this creature had a more... strict appearance. Luke couldn’t put his finger on it. It appeared as if the mannequin was built *into* the suit.

The mannequin adjusted his blood-red tie against a white shirt and a black jacket. **“Auditor 317-B report begins: Subject Luke Solus, potential anomalous animus has entered restricted M-Space, suspected of infiltrating A-Space in addition. Request immediate [Soul Erasure].”**

Luke held his breath, trying his best to stay silent. His racing heart betrayed him, but the shadows woven around his person held true.

There was a sound like a sledgehammer slamming against steel. Luke couldn’t help but lean around the corner of the black block and peer at the source.

The auditor was slowly walking toward him. Every footfall sounded impossibly loud.

The disembodied voice echoed across the strange grayness of this place, **“[Soul Erasure] granted 317-B. Excise the anomaly and report. Caution is advised. Destiny Entanglement detected between target and the Thirteenth.”**

The auditor paused and then nodded to himself, as if making a decision. Luke scuttled around to the other side of the block but saw that the auditor merely followed where he was no matter where he moved.

His shadows didn't seem to hide him as well as they usually did. As far as he could tell, he was completely hidden.

Observe, orient, decide, act, Luke thought to himself. He could stay here and let the freakish creature come toward him and do whatever soul erasure was, which didn't seem like a good thing *at all*.

That thing didn't just promise death, but utter oblivion. No chance of anything past this life.

It was hard not to take that seriously. Because if Luke was wrong, it would cost him *everything*.

He knew what happened when a person was considered an anomaly.

It felt like his lifespan just shrank from decades to seconds.

There were two options here. Fight or run. Hiding wasn't working.

As the auditor came around the side of the cube, Luke was already up on his feet with his swords drawn. The auditor, despite not having a face, radiated a sense of confusion at Luke's willingness to fight back.

Swords slashing out, Luke stepped forward into a one-two strike, cutting across the, diagonally.

The auditor raised a hand and spoke, "Stop."

Luke's muscles turned to water and seized up in turn, betraying his command.

Somehow, it was worse that there wasn't a sense of smugness or satisfaction from the auditor. This was just another job to him, something mundane and routine.

Acidic anger bubbled up from Luke's stomach as he felt his life drawing to a close because he had violated some stupid rule.

Because he dared to know more.

Worse, by far, was that he wasn't even able to put up a fight. His body obeyed this faceless monster, ignoring its own sense of preservation.

Stepping forward calmly within Luke's striking distance, the auditor reached into his breast pocket. It was completely unfazed by Luke's quivering swords as he struggled to fight against the auditor's iron-hard will.

He pulled out what looked like an expensive silver fountain pen.

Luke stared with mute horror at the pen. His sense of danger was going haywire. Sweat beaded on his brow while he bent every ounce of his will toward breaking through the bonds that held his body hostage.

I will not be killed like this!

The auditor, moving with incredible care and precision as if he had all the time in the world, adjusted something on the pen. A brilliant light flashed out from one side of the pen.

Sigils and runes, written in brilliant light, flowed out from the pen that Luke now realized was a weapon. Even though he didn't have any idea how it worked, he knew if the weapon touched him, he was worse than dead.

Arms trembling with the effort of resistance, Luke refused to look away from the raised blade of glowing runes.

With all the ceremony of taking out the trash, the auditor lifted the blade high, then swung down to end Luke's story.